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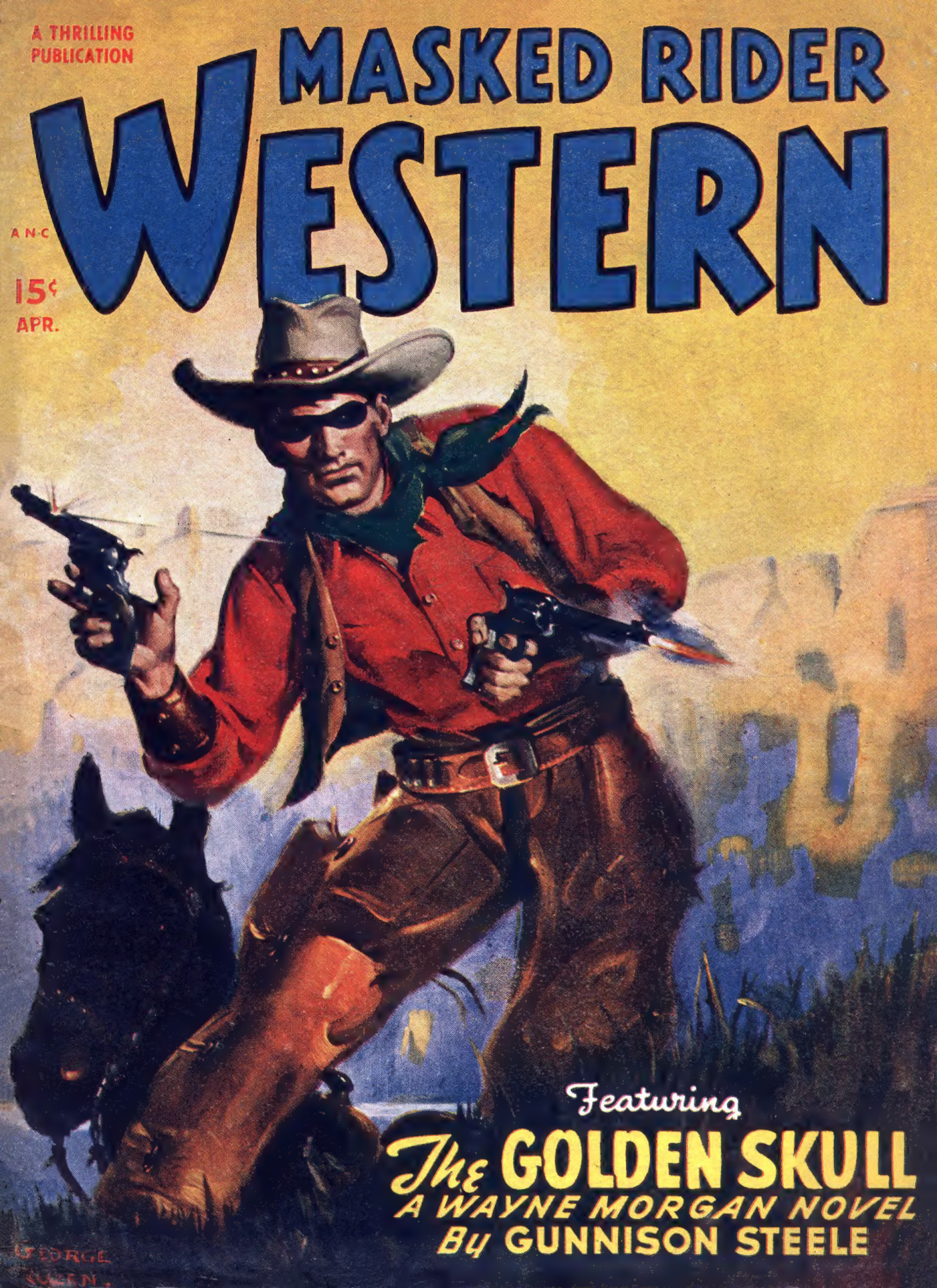

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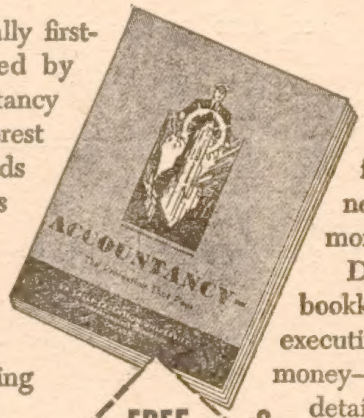

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The true story of a fabulous outlaw who twisted Tombstone by the tail

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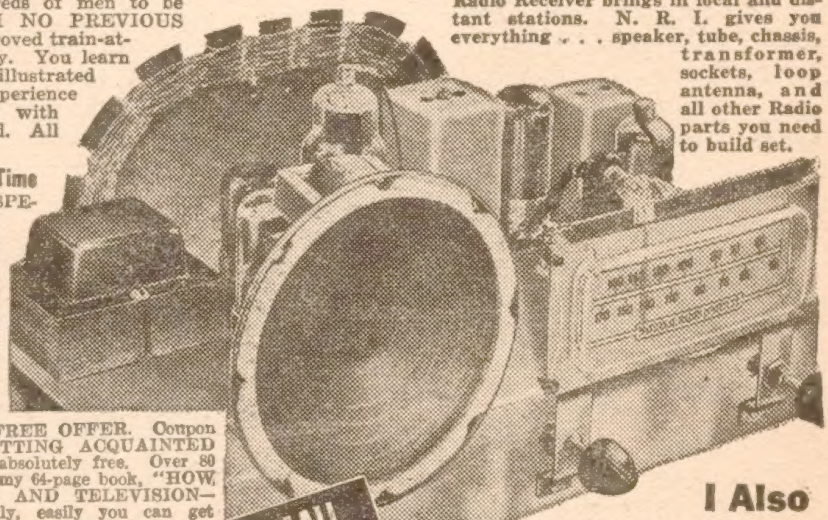

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HI WADDIES, just throw your twine on a bronc in the corral and we will be off on another trail jaunt, and as we ride we will let our imaginations run back to the days long before the birth of the oldest of us, back to the early days of the Santa Fe Trail.

Along that trail, one of the oldest of our nation, trekked the earliest of the westward bound pioneers, those pioneers whose rolling wagons and plodding pack-mules beat out the paths of future generations, whose courage and hardships made our peace and prosperity of today possible.

They were not conscious of history, dates, or the march of destiny. They felt heat and cold, endured thirst and hunger, fatigue and disappointment. Today, traveling over the same route by streamlined trains at a mile a minute speed, we are sometimes known to grumble if our car is not properly air conditioned, and we seldom give a thought to the hardships and privations of the men who paved the way for us.

A Perilous Cruise

Those early pioneers found the Santa Fe Trail no mere skein of tangled ruts connecting two distant towns. To them, that trail was a perilous cruise across a boundless sea of grass, over forbidding mountains, among wild beasts and wilder men, but at the end of that trail they all envisioned wealth. Some envisioned homes for themselves and their families. Others wanted a wild gay life of adventure. But all dreamed of greater wealth.

The Santa Fe Trail came into being long before other trails such as the Chisholm, the Goodnight-Loving Trail, or any of those noted trails over which thousands and thousands of longhorn cattle were driven to market. It started at Independence, Missouri, and ran westward and southwestward to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and pioneer travelers along that trail were apt to feel the insistent wind, the drenching downpour, the bitter blizzard or the parching sun.

They would in all probability know the danger of guard duty when the wolves howled from the lonely hills and the skulking Indian fitted an arrow to his bowstring behind the sagebrush. They might feel the thrill of riding pell-mell in a dash after buffalo, or they might know the stubborn defense of a wagon train drawn up in a circle while every man and woman fought to ward off an attack by Indians.

Three Great Highways

More than a hundred years ago three great highways diverged from St. Louis and the States into the wilderness of the Great American Desert—the Far West. All three were hazardous and long, highways on which danger and adventure seemed to wait for all comers. Yet each had a character and a traffic all its own.

The first route led up the winding, muddy Missouri, some two thousand miles to the Continental Divide. It was a waterway, the route of voyager and keelboatman, of the Mackinaw barge and the steamboat, and led at last to the rendezous of the beaver-trappers and the fur-baron's lone stockade.

The second route ran overland up the Platte, over South Pass, on to Eldorado and

(Continued on page 8)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

the farm lands beyond the ranges. Over that beaten highway crawled the covered wagons of the movers, slow caravans carrying the household goods of families seeking new homes across the continent. That was the one way trail of the farmer, the Oregon Trail.

The third, the Trail to Santa Fe, was from the beginning a two-way thoroughfare of international trade. It too had its wagon trains, its ox-carts and laden mules, but those wagons and carts were not always occupied by family parties. On the way west they creaked and swayed, crammed to overflowing with precious wares of Yankee commerce; on the way back, they groaned under corded bales of buffalo robes and beaver, and the rich metals of Mexican mines. This was the highway of the commerce of the prairies, the trader's road.

Indians and Outlaws

Being a route of commerce, the Santa Fe Trail was perhaps the most dangerous trail of that time. At times Indians swooped down and levied tribute in hair and horseflesh. At times Mexican officials overreached themselves, mulcting the rich Americanos out of all reason. Every caravan going either way was supposed to carry wealth and this made the Santa Fe Trail one where the outlaw often found an excellent chance to rob the traveler.

At Fort Dodge, in western Kansas, the trail split and one route continued practically due west to Bent's Fort and then turned south over Raton Pass. The other branch ran in a southwesterly direction from Fort Dodge, and the two joined again near where the little village of Wagon Mound now is located in New Mexico.

The trail passed through what is now the village of Council Grove, Kansas, now boasting a population of about three thousand. On the north side of the main street there are two marked oak trees. One was used as a pioneer post office as early as 1820, the travelers leaving letters here to be picked up when another wagon train came through. Under the other the Plains Indians met with U. S. Commissioners in 1825 and signed the treaty which gave the Government the right-of-way for the Santa Fe Trail.

(Continued on page 10)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

The Santa Fe Trail was like a long rope flung carelessly across the plains, an old rope, loosely twisted, so that here and there the strands parted, only to join again. At either end, the rope frayed into several strands, several routes. At the Missouri end, trails led from Fort Leavenworth, Independence, Franklin, Kansas and Westport. But all these united to form the main trail before reaching Council Grove.

Beyond Civilization

All these prairie ports were also outfitting places for those bound for Santa Fe and the west, but many times travelers were not fully organized until they reached Council Grove, more than a hundred miles west of Independence, for beyond Council Grove they were practically beyond civilization, were soon in the land of the buffalo, and in the depths of the Indian country where hostile tribes were to be found!

There were many obstacles along the route. Indians, wild beasts and outlaws were not the only dangers. There were often swollen rivers or streams to ford, and most of the streams, if not swollen, had such steep banks that it was real labor getting the wagons down into the stream on one side and up out of the stream on the other. Often the crossing of streams came late in the afternoon or early in the evening, and it was a custom handed down by other travelers always to cross a stream before making camp if possible, because during the night cloudbursts or heavy rains upstream might make the stream impassable and several days might be lost awaiting the receding of the water.

Then too, there were bogs along the trail in some places, where the earth or soil was black and of the gumbo variety. It might look firm and solid but the heavy wagons would sink to the hubs, then ox-teams would have to be doubled on each wagon and every able-bodied man would have to put his shoulder to the task of getting each wagon through the bog, and if there is anything that would test the patience of any man it would be to have his wagon bog down at the close of a tough day of travel.

The first camp west of Council Grove was one of the best on the entire route, as there

(Continued on page 89)

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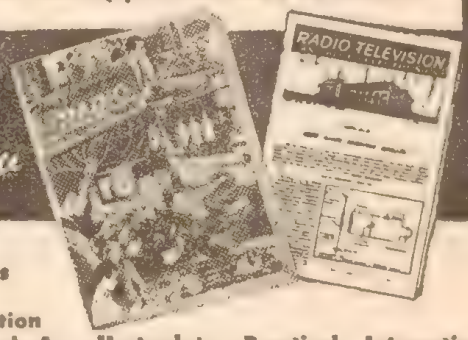

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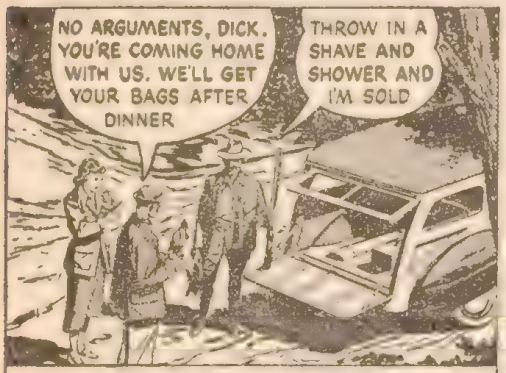
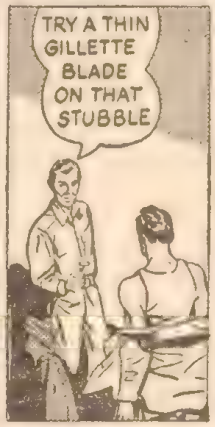
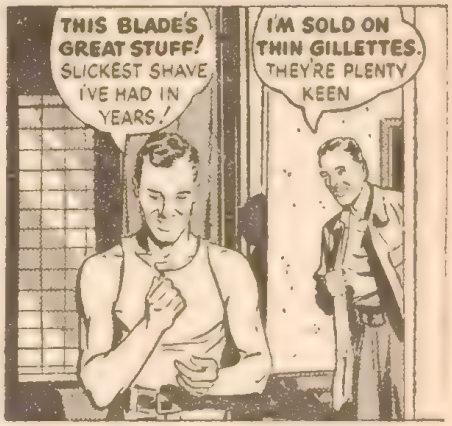
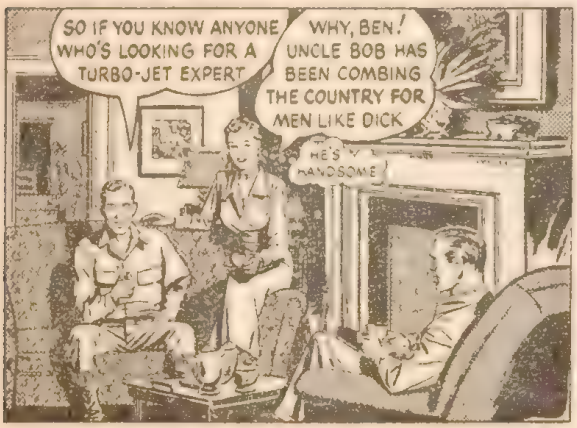
FALCONRY, AN ANCIENT SPORT, STILL SURVIVES AND BEN DAIL IS SHOWING HIS SISTER HOW IT'S DONE



AND SO AFTER A DAY-LONG CROW HUNT WITH HAWK AND GUN...



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WHY, BEN! UNCLE BOB HAS BEEN COMBING THE COUNTRY FOR MEN LIKE DICK
HE'S HANDSOME

MEN, WHEN IT COMES TO EXTRA SHAVING COMFORT, PLUS ECONOMY, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICE BLADES. YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION, TOO, FOR THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE
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a Wayne Morgan novel

THE GOLDEN SKULL

The Masked Rider heads for Thundergod Canyon when the secret of Devil Dan's treasure stirs up a gun fandango!

by GUNNISON STEELE

CHAPTER I

Death's Head!

JOHNNY NO-LUCK, a paunchy, sullen-eyed Hopi Indian in greasy range garb, hesitated before the batwings of the Taos Queen Saloon in Tomahawk, Arizona. He was uncomfortably aware of the tell-tale bulge underneath his tattered coat which was neither a gun nor money. For while his squaw Red Fawn cooked for Dave Slade's XL outfit, Johnny himself did little except loaf and drink firewater when he could get it.

Johnny tugged resolutely at his floppy old hat, licking his lips with anticipation at the inviting sound of tinkling glasses inside the lighted saloon. Sometimes old

Johnny No-Luck's Sinister Discovery Plunges

"Waspy Bill" Lee slipped him a drink, if he had the money to pay for it. But now the Hopi was flat broke.

Two cowboys barged between the batwings, laughing as the doors knocked Johnny backward. The Hopi muttered angrily, but picked himself up and slunk into a dark alley alongside the Taos Queen, tightly clutching the thing under his coat. He inched up to a window and peered into the big, smoke-hazed room.

The Taos Queen was fairly well-crowded. Wiry, walrus-mustached old Waspy Bill and a helper were doling out drinks to the range-garbed men lining the mahogany bar. Several poker games were in progress.

Johnny No-Luck's gaze paused at a table near the back of the room, about which sat four men. He had seen this quartet of card-playing cronies before, for they played draw poker here almost every week night.

One of them was Ben Jory, dark, soft-voiced, fancy-dressing owner of the Taos Queen. The Hopi considered Jory a *cultus* hombre. Then there were Nick Farrand, president of the Tomahawk bank, a heavy, middle-aged man with a reddish spade beard; quiet, good-natured Kirby Stone, owner of the big Bar X outfit; and a skinny, scar-faced man named Jim Roan who claimed to represent a cattle-buying syndicate.

Johnny No-Luck knew little about these four and cared less. All he wanted was a drink.

HE LEFT the alley and again approached the batwings. This time he went all the way inside, casting furtive glances from side to side as he shuffled to the bar. He stood a moment unnoticed by the laughing, talking men about him. Finally old Waspy Bill saw him, and scowled his displeasure.

"What yuh want, Johnny?" he growled.

"Firewater," the Indian grunted hopefully.

"You got the money to pay for it?"

"No wampum. Maybe sell um on credit, huh?"

"Nope, no credit. No wampum, no firewater. Besides, you know I ain't supposed to sell yuh the stuff."

Frowning, Johnny No-Luck turned away and started shuffling toward the batwings. Then he paused, his beady black eyes brightening, and slowly took from under his jacket the thing he had been clutching, and placed it on the bar.

"You like um, huh?" He grinned. "Maybe swap um for bottle of fire water?"

Waspy Bill's bony jaw dropped with ludicrous surprise as he stared at the thing. It was a human skull, bleached snow-white by exposure to sun and sand, its gleaming teeth grinning with ghastly mirth!

"Get that cussed thing out of here!" Waspy Bill yelped. "You tryin' to drive off all my customers?"

Johnny looked crest-fallen, started to pick up the skull. But by now others had noticed the skull. An excited hum of talk broke over the room and a dozen men gathered about the Hopi, staring and poking at what the Indian had hopefully tried to barter for a bottle of whisky.

"What's that there in the top of the thing?" a puncher demanded. "It looks like . . . By gosh, it *is* a sliver of gold!"

The commotion increased as the four men who had been playing poker at the table near the back of the room, got up and pushed their way through the crowd to the bar. The others gave way respectfully before these four—Farrand, Jory, Kirby Stone and Jim Roan.

With an avidness that was matched by his three cronies, Ben Jory took up the skull and examined it. It required only seconds to confirm the puncher's statement. The crown of the skull was inlaid with a disk of solid gold, the disk apparently having been substituted for a segment of bone while the skull's owner was still alive!

Jory's teeth were clamped tightly about his cigar, and in his black eyes was a furtive, greedy excitement as he looked slowly at the faces ringing him. There was no laughter in the smoke-filled room now; only a queer tension and expectancy.

Wayne Morgan Into a Roaring Range Ruckus!

"That's a queer thing," murmured the saloonman-gambler. Then his voice sharpened as he whirled suddenly on Johnny No-Luck, and his slender fingers bit into the Hopi's arm. "Where'd yuh find this skull, Johnny?"

But Johnny, obviously made wary by the abrupt change his innocent exhibition of the skull had caused, shook his head.

"No remember where I found um," he declared. "Only want to swap for one—maybe two bottles of firewater."

"Bill," Jory ordered, "give my friend Johnny all the firewater he wants—on the house. But first, Johnny, suppose we go up to my office and have a pow-wow."

"Just a minute, Ben," Nick Farrand protested mildly. "Let's not rush things. Johnny's *my* friend, too. And I've got a full bottle of private stuff in my office over in the bank."

"All at once this Injun seems to have a lot of *amigos*," the cattle-buyer, Jim Roan, said cynically. "After all, it's just an old skull, and the gold plate's worth only a few dollars. What's all the excitement?"

"I'll tell you what it's about," a cowboy said loudly. "That skull belonged to—"

"Let's go up to my office," Ben Jory said impatiently to Johnny No-Luck. "Bill, hand me out a bottle, right now!"

BUT it was readily apparent that Johnny No-Luck didn't trust the fancy-dressing saloonman. He had plucked

WAYNE MORGAN

the gold-plated skull from Jory's hands, and now he looked cunningly at Nick Farrand.

"You got um full bottle in your office?" he grunted.

"Plumb to the cork," the banker declared eagerly. "And it's all yours."

"After he does some talkin', eh, Nick?" Kirby Stone drawled. "Personally, I have no ax to grind, but I don't like to see high-handed tactics used on an ignorant Indian."

"My business is my own, Kirby, and I'll thank you to keep out of it," Farrand said stiffly. "Are you ready to go, Johnny?"

"Heap ready," Johnny agreed. "Maybe take whole bottle before I remember where I found this skull!"

Nick Farrand and the Hopi turned and left the saloon. A babble of talk rose behind them. Ben Jory stalked angrily up the stairs that led to his office and living quarters in the upper story of the building.

The street was dark and windy as Farrand and Johnny No-Luck crossed to the white-painted bank building. Farrand unlocked the front door, stepped through, and lighted a lamp. He led the way toward the back of the bank, where he had a cubby-hole personal office, carelessly neglecting to lock the front door in his eagerness to ply Johnny No-Luck with questions.

For Farrand, as had almost every other man in the Taos Queen, had instantly realized the significance of that gold-plated human skull. He knew that the skull might hold the key to a fortune.

Nick Farrand sat down in a chair before a desk, motioned the Hopi to another chair.

"Now, Johnny, you know I'm your friend," the banker said persuasively. "A friend of Dave Slade's, too. Where did you find this skull?"

Johnny didn't know that Farrand held a mortgage on Dave Slade's ranch and was threatening foreclosure. He licked his lips, grinning.

"Got um bad memory. Maybe a drink would help."

Muttering a curse, Farrand opened a desk drawer and took from it a quart of whisky. Johnny No-Luck drank avidly.

"Now about the skull," Farrand prompted impatiently.

The Hopi scowled, shaking his head with fake regret.

"No catch um memory," he declared.

"In Thundergod Canyon—or maybe up in the hills above there?" Farrand snapped. "You're stalling, you mangy redskin, and I won't have it! I've lived up to my part of the bargain. Now come across! Where'd you find this gold-plated skull?"

Johnny looked blankly at the grinning skull there on the desk between them. He knew now that more than one man would jump at the chance to pay more than a quart of whisky for that skull.

"Why you want to know where I catch um skull?" he countered.

"That's my business, blast you—white man's business! You want to get into trouble with the law? Look, Johnny!" Farrand rammed his hand into a pocket of his broadcloth coat and brought forth a purse. His hands were unsteady as he took several banknotes from the purse and offered them to the Indian. "That proves I'm your friend, doesn't it? With that much wampum you can buy all the firewater you want!"

Johnny's hand inched toward the money, but before he could grasp it the door to the tiny office crashed open and two men leaped into the room with drawn guns. The men wore sweaty range garb, and ordinary bandanna kerchiefs covered their features from their eyes down.

"Yuh won't need that wampum, Injun—nor you either, banker, if yuh move crooked!" one of them said harshly.

The Hopi's coppery features grew slack with surprise, while Farrand's reddish beard seemed fairly to bristle with rage.

"Stealing the skull don't do you any good," he declared wildly. "Besides, you have no right to it!"

"And I reckon you do?"

"As much right as any other man. Get out of my office, you fools—you can't have the skull!"

"We don't give a hoot in Hades for that hunk of bone, banker man," sneered the burly, masked man. "All we want is to know where it come from, the same as you do. Get on yore feet, redskin. We'll dig it out of yuh if we have to rip off yore flea-bitten hide piece by piece!"

AN OATH of explosive, frustrated anger ripped from the enraged banker's lips. Desperately his hand slashed into the half-open desk drawer which held a twin-barreled derringer.

One of the masked men snarled an oath and leaped at Farrand, gun upraised. Farrand twisted aside in a wild effort to get from under the descending gun-barrel, jerking up the wicked-looking derringer.

But the clubbed gun hit him above the ear with a dull thud, and the bulky banker crashed backward to the floor.

With amazing quickness Johnny No-Luck had grasped the significance of what

Flame and lead frothed from the muzzles of the Masked Rider's twin guns, driving the outlaw leader to the cave floor (CHAP. XV)

was happening. He had ducked under the bludgeoning gun of the other prowler, snatched up the golden skull from the desk. Now he leaped for the shaded window at the back of the tiny room.

The frightened Hopi went through the window in a headlong dive, clutching the skull tightly, taking shade and window frame with him. He heard the waspish snarl of a bullet past his ear as he landed asprawl in a damp alley. Then Johnny clawed to his feet and bounded along the alley.

CHAPTER II

Thundergod Canyon

JOHNNY NO-LUCK gained the front street, aware of an excited slash of voices and a splash of light from the Taos Queen. He swerved, raced along the plank walk. Thirty seconds later he was astride a skinny roan cayuse, his moccasined heels beating a tattoo against bony ribs as he sought to get more speed out of the gaunt beast.

Johnny raced through the night, each second expecting more bullets to rip out of the dark at him, honestly bewildered and frightened by the astonishing chain of events his exhibition of the gold-plated skull had loosed. He didn't know what the skull meant to these white men, but he knew enough to know he was a marked man now. For some queer reason the palefaces were willing to kill to gain possession of the skull which he still hugged tightly to his paunchy stomach.

It didn't occur to Johnny No-Luck to rid himself of the accursed thing. That would have been asking too much of an Indian of Johnny's low, and acquisitive mentality.

Thirty minutes later, on a reeling pony, he reached Dave Slade's XL ranch where he and his squaw lived—and she worked. Once the XL had been big and prosperous, but its acres had dwindled and now it was run-down.

Lights gleamed in the front living room of the ranchhouse. But Johnny paid no attention to that as he tumbled from his exhausted cayuse and burst into the small room at the back of the house which he shared on occasion with his fat squaw, Red Fawn. Red Fawn gave one look at her errant spouse as he stood wide-eyed and gasping with his back to the closed door, and reached for the stove poker.

"You heap drunk with firewater!" she accused harshly.

"No drunk," Johnny denied, rolling his eyes.

"Then why you have evil spirits in um eyes? What you do with um skull?"

"*Malo hombres* try to kill me!" Johnny No-Luck gasped.

Hopi words poured from Johnny's lips in a torrent. For once, Red Fawn believed him. Three minutes later they were in the brightly-lighted, comfortable living room of the XL ranchhouse where Dave Slade sat with his slender, red-haired daughter Tana.

Dave Slade was a big, thick-shouldered man with seamed features and a shock of white hair. His eyes, deep-sunk in their sockets, held misery and despair. For the XL owner sat in a wheel-chair, paralyzed from the waist down, as he had been sitting for the last five years. Slade was a man who, because of his helplessness, had watched what was his gradually drift away like sand between his fingers.

Tana, although she had been able to do little to help him, held all the fire and fighting determination that he had lost. A tall, fiery-haired girl with a strong but rounded body, she was strikingly beautiful despite the man's denims and shirt she wore.

She looked up quickly, and her father wearily, as Red Fawn and Johnny No-Luck burst into the room. In her fat hands Red Fawn was excitedly waving the human skull.

"Johnny!" Tana said, in a shocked voice. "I warned you about getting drunk. You let Red Fawn alone!"

"Johnny no drunk!" Red Fawn protested. "He find evil skull. It cause heap trouble in Tomahawk, maybe because it part gold. Johnny got to vamose, pronto, or the *malo hombres* kill him!"

Dave Slade straightened with a jerk.

"Let me see that skull!" he demanded hoarsely.

Red Fawn meekly placed the gold-plated skull in Slade's bony hands. The

crippled rancher examined it briefly, particularly the sliver of gold, and feverish hope and excitement flared in his dull eyes. His hands shook violently.

"What is it, father?" Tana asked.

"It's Devil Dan's skull!" Slade said in a strained voice. His burning eyes glared at the Hopi. "Johnny, where did you find this skull? And don't lie!"

Terror had miraculously freshened the Indian's memory. He told exactly where he had found the skull. Then he babbled out the story of what had happened during the last hour.

"I must flee!" he moaned. "Even now the evil ones pursue me, and they will surely kill me if they discover I have told you where I found the accursed skull!"

"They won't find out!" Dave Slade promised grimly. "You will leave the skull here with me. Tana, you know where what money we have is in the bureau drawer. Give it to Johnny. And you, Johnny, saddle my big steeldust. Ride far and fast, and don't come back until I send for you. And remember this: Don't tell anybody where you found the skull!"

* * * * *

THUNDERGOD CANYON, even on clear days, was not an inviting place. Now, with a storm raging furiously, it seemed a primeval world of wicked violence and evil-filled shadows where prehistoric monsters might crouch ready to pounce upon anyone so foolhardy as to venture within its tormented depths.

Rain came down in driving, blinding sheets. Lightning fanged across the sullen sky, painting the canyon's walls, cathedral-like spires and gnarled pines with a weird red flame. Thunder boomed and rocketed like the firing of huge cannons among the granite battlements. Although it was mid-day, except when the lightning blazed its red challenge, the place lay in deep shadows.

Thundergod Canyon was no more than five miles in length. For the first four miles it was almost a quarter of a mile in width from wall to wall, with its floor studded with boulders, spires and dwarf pines, and a narrow but swift-flowing stream closely clinging to the base of the west wall. At the end of four miles the hemming walls jerked abruptly inward and the rushing river plunged thunderously between sheer, dripping cliffs two hundred feet in height.

The east wall, although sheer and unscalable, was pitted at its base by grotto-like caves.

It was in one of these huge caves near the canyon entrance where two men, caught short of Tomahawk by the storm, had taken refuge. The cave entrance, well above the canyon floor, was almost concealed by boulders and rock slabs. The cave itself was dry, and light from a flickering wood fire danced over the walls.

One of the men was white, the other an Indian. The white man, Wayne Morgan, was young, powerful, wearing a plain gray shirt and levis. Twin Colts, their black butts worn shiny, rested snugly against his lean thighs. His features were brown, rugged, his wide lips good-natured.

The Yaqui Indian, whom he called Blue Hawk, was in drill pants and white shirt, with a scarlet sash tied about his lithe waist. His coppery body was perfectly proportioned. His raven-black hair fell almost to his shoulders and was held in place by a red bandeau girding his head. The Yaqui wore no gun, but sheathed to his scarlet sash was a long-bladed, wicked-looking knife.

These two, white man and Indian, were inseparable. Intensely loyal to each other, they had ridden danger trails over all the West. Wayne Morgan was swift and deadly with the black .45s he wore, a tough adversary in any kind of fight. Blue Hawk was equally deadly with the rifle he carried in a saddle scabbard, or with the keen-bladed knife.

Bedrolls and other gear lay on the floor of the cave. In another section of the cavern, forming a natural stable, were four horses, one of them a magnificent black stallion.

Blue Hawk, glancing up from the sizzling skillet he held over the fire, smiled slightly. Educated in Mission schools, he spoke without a trace of accent.

"The thunder gods are angry, Senor," he said to Morgan, for whom he never had any other name than Senor. "They are fighting among themselves."

Morgan, standing at the cave entrance and staring out into the storm-tortured canyon, nodded grimly.

"They picked a good place for the battle

then. Looks like a scene out of somebody's nightmare."

"This is Thundergod Canyon," the Yaqui explained quietly. "I was here once before when I was a small boy. Many legends have their beginnings here. Did you see the crude pictures and hieroglyphics on the walls and boulders as we entered?"

Morgan nodded again. Although he spoke the vernacular of the range, he was a well-educated man, and spoke the lingo of the country through choice.

"They are found over a lot of the Southwest," he observed. "Some ancient race left them hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago."

Blue Hawk nodded, his face suddenly somber and thoughtful.

Wayne Morgan continued to stare out into the canyon, impressed by the Titanic struggle of the elements. The wind howled a dirge, and when the lightning flamed he could see the rain driving like a million tiny silver spears. He could see the turret-like spires etched against the lurid flame, and the gnarled trees shivering like old women in the storm. The thunder was like the tramping of giants in battle.

SUDDENLY Wayne Morgan tensed. His delicately attuned ears had picked a new sound out of the tumult. Blue Hawk straightened, laid aside his skillet, came quickly to Morgan's side. Both stood staring out.

Momentarily the chasm lay in shadows. But the sound came again—two close-spaced gunshots, down canyon! That way lay the spot where the canyon narrowed and the stream plunged between granite walls.

"Shots, Senor," Blue Hawk murmured. "Somebody lost in the storm, perhaps, and needing aid?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. There are too many caves for . . . Look, Hawk! Over there!"

The lightning had flamed, and in the hissing light they both saw the rider through the shifting curtains of rain. The rider, bent low in his saddle against the storm's fury, was no more than two hundred feet away, and riding desperately toward the canyon entrance. On his present course he would pass within a few yards of the grotto where Morgan and the Yaqui stood.

"Somebody's after that hombre," Morgan said quickly. "He didn't fire them shots. There was no gun in his hand!"

The lightning had faded, but now it blazed again, showing horse and rider almost directly before them. The horse, although straining mightily, was floundering and slithering in the mud. The rider's face, as he twisted in the saddle to fling a glance backward, showed white and plain in the brilliant light.

"A girl, Senor!" Blue Hawk exclaimed.

That startling fact had at the same instant become apparent to Morgan. The pale, frightened face was obviously that of a young girl. She had lost her hat, and her tawny hair streamed and glistened in the lightning.

She raced on past the cave entrance, unaware of those watching her, and vanished beyond a nest of head-high boulders.

"A girl, in this spooky place and with a storm blowin'," Morgan mused. "With somebody takin' pot-shots at her, to boot. What do you make of it, Hawk?"

"Trouble!" The Yaqui spoke softly, but his dark eyes gleamed. "And here comes the trouble, Senor."

A group of five poncho-clad riders hove into view from the same direction the girl had come. They, too, were bent forward in saddles, peering through the rain, their horses floundering in the mud. Guns showed in the hands of some of them.

CHAPTER III

Storm Guns

IT WAS quickly apparent that these men had lost the girl. They pulled their mounts to a slithering halt just before coming even with the cave where Morgan and Blue Hawk were watching. Milling uncertainly as they sought sign of their prey, they were ghostly figures in the shadows until the lightning flamed.

Then their faces stood out in stark relief, hard and wolfishly evil, like gargoyle masks in the lightning's red glare.

"Looks like she's got clean away!" Mor-

gan and Blue Hawk heard one of them shout. "We'll have to wait for another chance. Blast it, Gus, why didn't yuh knock her from the saddle when yuh had yore sights lined on her?"

"You know the Boss wants her alive," one of the other men answered. "Dead men—dead women neither—can't talk!"

"Well, what do we do now?" complained the questioner. "Couldn't find a mountain in this storm. Tom Norbec and one of his cowboys are still back there, and—"

"Here they come now!" growled the man who had been called Gus. "The Boss'll give us a bonus if we salt Norbec. Scatter in among them boulders and when they come close enough we'll let 'em have it!"

The hard-faced riders rode among a nearby scattering of high sandstone boulders and tumbled from saddles. And now the two men hidden in the cave saw two other riders approaching from down-canyon. The two new oncoming men were riding slowly along, rifles in hands, peering from right to left, obviously wary of a trap.

Suddenly a gun blasted among the tall boulders almost directly below the cave. One of the approaching riders threw up his hands, reeled in his saddle, then tumbled to the ground.

The other rider jerked his mount to a halt, leaped from saddle, seized his fallen companion by the shoulders and started dragging him toward a crevice in a wall ten feet away. By some miracle he made it, with lead from the ambushers' guns coming in a hail about him and his dead or wounded saddlemate.

But Wayne Morgan had not waited to see matters reach this point. Whirling from the cave entrance, he snapped:

"Time for the Masked Rider to take a hand, Hawk!"

Instantly Blue Hawk leaped to the offset that held the four horses. Within seconds he had bridle and saddle on the huge black stallion there, the mount they called Midnight.

By this time Morgan had undone his bedroll. From it he hastily took a long,

Sitting on a boulder, a rifle in his huge hands trained on Morgan, was Cat Hogan (CHAP. IX)

flowing black cloak which he draped about his wide shoulders. Over his blue eyes he fastened a black domino mask and pulled a black sombrero down over his thick dark hair. At his thighs hung black-butted six-shooters.

As swiftly as this—within seconds—Wayne Morgan, wandering cowboy, was transformed into the black-clad Masked Rider, the famous Robin Hood outlaw of the danger trails whose roaring guns and reckless courage had brought justice to the oppressed over all the West. Wherever and whenever the wicked threatened the righteous, there he and his Yaqui companion were apt to appear suddenly and unexpectedly.

No living man except Blue Hawk knew that the Masked Rider and Wayne Morgan was the same man, and the Yaqui would have endured endless torment before betraying the secret. Not even Blue Hawk, however, knew the Masked Rider's real identity, nor why he had dedicated his life and guns to savage warfare against evil-doers. That was Wayne Morgan's own secret, and probably would be to the end of his life, as would the reason for his masquerade.

As the masked man leaped into saddle, the great stallion, always sensing excitement when mounted by that dare-devil figure, reared and pivoted, its iron-shod hoofs striking sparks from the granite floor of the cave. Then they shot toward the cave entrance.

In the canyon outside now, a continuous drumming of gunfire beat above the storm's tumult. The ambushers, enraged because of their failure to get both the riders they considered their prey, but still determined to finish the job, had started a relentless advance through the line of boulders toward the shallow crevice where the two dismounted men they had attacked were huddled.

A single gun answered them sporadically. But there could be but one ending to such an uneven battle, and this the Masked Rider saw instantly as he reached the cave entrance. Through the rain he caught glimpses of the five attackers as they crept like stalking wolves upon the crouched men one of the killers had identified by the name of Norbec and one of his riders.

Farther out, the masked man caught whiplashes of flame from the crevice in the wall as the wounded beseiged man fired futilely.

"Cover me from here, Hawk!" the man in black ordered crisply.

THE Masked Rider and the great stallion shot out of the cave, sliding and plummeting down the slight decline that led to the canyon floor. In each of the masked man's hands was a long-barreled gun, and his cape streamed in the howling wind, giving him the appearance of a mounted and black-winged demon as he rushed straight at the ambushers.

One of his black guns roared, and an ambusher among the boulders squalled a curse and clawed shale from his eyes. The others half-whirled, surprise making a pattern over their rain-splashed faces as they saw the rushing black-clad rider and horse.

Still the Masked Rider drove straight at them, lightning flickering over him weirdly, his twin guns blasting.

"It's the Masked Rider!" a voice bawled. "Gun the killin' son down!"

But their momentary panic had thrown them into confusion, and they fell over each other in their wild attempts to line their sights on the charging figure. By the time they had straightened themselves out, horse and rider had swerved abruptly and crashed through a line of dwarf cedars.

He reappeared seconds later, at another point, driving at the ambushers again, flame and lead spilling from his gun muzzles.

One of the gunmen stumbled, fell, but clawed frantically to his feet.

And now Blue Hawk's rifle started crashing from the cave entrance, spraying the boulders with lead.

The huge stallion charged to within forty feet of the boulders, stopping abruptly at a pressure of its rider's knees. The black horse reared, pawing the air, an awesome figure in the lightning's glare. The black guns of his rider snarled angrily.

And another of the gunmen went down, and stayed down, sprawled in the mud.

"There's a whole slew of 'em!" a panic-edged voice bellowed. "They've got us whipsawed! Let's hit for tall timber!"

"What about Charley there?" another man bawled.

"Let 'em lay!" bawled the first voice callously.

A stumbling, confused retreat toward the close-gathered horses began. The guns of the running men were firing at the black-garbed rider, and at the flashes of the Yaqui's gun at the cave mouth, but without accuracy.

The Masked Rider continued to fire, weaving back and forth on the plunging stallion. But now that the attackers were in retreat, his tactics were merely meant to increase the speed of their flight. He did not know what this was about, and he never took life needlessly, but he did know that he had to help protect the lives of two men who were marked for death.

He knew, also, that Blue Hawk would anticipate his wishes and act accordingly.

The ambushers had by now reached their horses. They piled into wet saddles and, firing a wild salvo back over their shoulders, pounded away into the rain toward the canyon mouth.

The Masked Rider let them go. He rode over to the boulders, dismounted, warily approached the figure sprawled face-down there in the mud and water. He turned the body over. The poncho-clad man lying there was burly and beak-nosed, and he was dead.

Hearing boots slogging in the mud, the Masked Rider turned and saw a tall, slicker-clad man coming toward him from the nearby low walls. The man was about thirty, sandy-haired, with square features that were now grim-set. The masked man stood waiting, hands near his now holstered guns.

The slicker-clad man approached to within ten feet, and stopped, the muzzle of the Winchester cradled in his arm pointing toward the masked man. He regarded the Masked Rider with a flat, suspicious stare.

"You the gent known as the Masked Rider?" he asked bluntly.

The Robin Hood outlaw nodded. "I've been called that."

"I've heard of you. I've heard you are an outlaw and cold-blooded killer—and on the other hand I've heard you fight only for what is right and just." The rifle muzzle was lowered. "From here on, I'll know which to believe, since I've seen you in action. . . . My name's Tom Norbec."

"Glad to know yuh, Norbec. My friend and me were holed up in a cave up there." The masked man gestured toward the cave mouth, where Blue Hawk still remained unseen. "When we saw the jackpot you and yore amigo were in we decided to take a hand. He hurt bad?"

NORBEC answered bitterly and angrily.

"He's dead," he said. "Smoky Ord. He was just a kid. He rode for me. The killin' coyotes shot him down without givin' him a chance!"

"I saw it happen, but was too late to stop it," the Masked Rider said quietly. "It was as cold-blooded a killin' as I ever saw. Where's yore outfit, Norbec?"

"The Half Moon, a couple of miles to the north. We're standin' on my land, right now."

They stepped back under an overhanging ledge to escape the rain which, although slackened, still came down steadily. The storm seemed to be abating. The black stallion stood quietly outside the circle of boulders.

The masked man pointed to the dead man.

"You know this jigger?"

"Never saw him before in my life," Norbec declared. "But there've been a lot of hardcase jaspers in and out of Tomahawk lately. Maybe they come from Hellgate. That's a settlement ten miles up in the hills. It's not exactly an outlaw town, but many a wanted man hangs out there."

"Norbec," the Masked Rider said bluntly, "I've taken chips in many a game where I wasn't invited or wanted. Mebbe I'll buy into this one on the same terms. Yore business is yore own. Yuh don't have to tell me anything unless yuh want to."

"Yuh just saved my hide, Masked Rider," the rancher declared grimly. "I'd be an ungrateful skunk if I didn't tell yuh anything yuh wanted to know. Shoot!"

"Who was the girl those buskies were after?"

"Tana Slade, I think, although I didn't see her. She's the daughter of Dave Slade, who owns the XL between my place and town—and she's the girl I hope to marry!"

"What was she doin' here in Thunder-

god Canyon?" pursued the masked man.

Norbec's hesitation was barely perceptible. "I don't know."

"And yuh don't know who the jiggers chasin' her were, nor why they were after her?" the Masked Rider persisted.

"As I told yuh. I don't know who they were. And I'm not shore why they were after her."

"But yuh have some idea?"

Tom Norbec stared at the dead man, as if weighing his answer carefully. At the outset the big rancher had impressed the Masked Rider as being straightforward and honest. Now, on the subject of the girl, he decided that Norbec was being evasive.

"Not enough of an idea, Masked Rider," Norbec finally said, "that I'd want to talk about it. Mebbe it wouldn't be fair to Tana."

"At least, yuh know why you and Smoky Ord were here in this storm."

"No secret about that," Norbec readily agreed. "Thundergod Canyon—up to the spot where it narrows and becomes just a stream between walls—is on what I call my land, although as yuh can see it is unfit for grazing. Some queer things have been happenin' in here lately, and naturally I was curious to find out what it was about."

"What kind of queer things?"

"Well, a lot of prowlin', for one thing, like somebody was looking for somethin'. A couple of my riders were shot at when they came in here after strays. So today Smoky and me took a pasear over here to have a look-see, and the storm caught us."

"Yuh knew Tana Slade was here, that she had been here before?"

"I knew she'd been here before, yes," Norbec admitted slowly. "I didn't know she was here today till the shootin' started, and I glimpsed her through the rain. Those hard-cases saw Smoky and me, too, but took out after Tana."

"They meant to kill her," the Masked Rider murmured.

"No," Norbec said quickly, "I think they just wanted to grab her. They think she knows—"

Norbec paused, glancing sharply at tne black-garbed rider. It was plain to the Masked Rider that the rancher was holding something back, possibly to shield the girl. Knowing the virtue of patience, and that at any rate he probably had gained all the information he could from Norbec, he moved out from the wall.

"Rain's about stopped," he commented. "I'll help yuh tie Smoky and this busky on their hosses. I reckon you'll do what needs to be done?"

"I'll take 'em in to Tomahawk," Norbec agreed. He added ominously, "And mebbe I'll have something to say to a couple of hombres named Farrand and Jory!"

CHAPTER IV

Challenge to a Killer

TEN minutes later the Masked Rider reentered the cave. Blue Hawk was calmly putting the finishing touches to the interrupted meal. Briefly, as he shed the soaked cape and domino mask, and became Wayne Morgan again, he told Blue Hawk of his conversation with Tom Norbec.

"Which means our stay in Tomahawk will possibly be longer than we had planned?" the Yaqui suggested slyly.

Morgan grinned. "It looks that way from here, Hawk. Seems like our toughest jobs just pop out of a clear sky, don't they? Only this time it was out of a stormy one. Them jaspers see you?"

"I'm afraid they did," Blue Hawk ruefully admitted. The Yaqui always spoke in the perfect English he had learned at Mission school, while Morgan preferred the local charteristic drawl. "In my eagerness to speed their departure I was careless and exposed myself at the cave mouth as they rode past. I'm sure they saw me."

"It don't matter. Anyway, the storm's about over and in a little while we'll be gettin' on to Tomahawk. I reckon this cave's as good as place as any to leave the gear and extra horses till we get the lay of things. Don't yuh think so, Hawk?"

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk agreed, and added meaningly, "Tomahawk should be of great interest. . . ."

In the town of Tomahawk, although the sun was not yet quite down, the Taos Queen Saloon was fairly well-crowded,

and the regular poker game between the four cronies—Farrand, Jory, Roan and Kirby Stone—had been going for half an hour.

This game appeared to be no different from the many others that had gone before it. Good-natured banter passed back and forth between the players. Each man stood his round of drinks when the time came. Yet a trained observer would have sensed that this was not the real thing, that reality lay buried beneath the light talk, the jeers and horseplay.

A lanky, mustached man came in, leaned across the bar and spoke to Waspy Bill Lee. Then the lanky man climbed the flight of stairs at the back of the room. Waspy Bill crossed to the poker table and paused at Ben Jory's elbow.

"Keg Barto wants to talk to yuh," Waspy Bill said.

Barto worked for Jory. The saloonman nodded, got to his feet.

"Will you gentlemen excuse me? I hate to make the game short-handed, but I've got to see Keg."

Jory's black eyes lifted to the spectators partially ringing the table. His gaze paused on a tall, blue-eyed man in range garb. The observant Jory had been aware of this double-gunned stranger in the Taos Queen for the last hour.

"Care to buy in, cowboy?" Jory asked.

"Don't care if I do," Wayne Morgan agreed smilingly, and slid into Jory's vacated chair. He had made a quick trip to town, and had already been there more than an hour. "Though if it gets too steep I might have to pull out."

"Just a cheap, friendly game," Kirby Stone declared. He thrust a horny hand across the table. "I'm Kirby Stone. This big galoot is Nick Farrand, and the skinny runt is Jim Roan."

Morgan gave them his name, and shook hands with the card players in turn, including Ben Jory. Then Jory turned and went up the stairs. The game went on.

As Stone had said, it was not a steep game. And although Wayne Morgan was an expert poker player, this was not the motivation behind his accepting Jory's chair. As a participant he would be able to observe the players more closely than by hanging around, watching. And he wanted to study them, for among these four were the two Tom Norbec had so ominously mentioned a few hours before in Thundergod Canyon—Nick Farrand and Ben Jory.

Half an hour passed, with Morgan about holding his own in the game. The banter continued between Farrand, Stone and Roan, and Morgan took part in this to a lesser extent. But, as had been the case ever since his arrival in the Taos Queen, he sensed that behind this façade of friendliness lurked an unmistakable hostility and suspicion.

Jory returned, but when Morgan started to vacate his seat, the saloonman said:

"Yuh're doin' a better job than I could, Morgan. These brush-poppers need a poker lesson. Keep yore seat."

JORY walked over to the bar and stood talking with Waspy Bill.

"Morgan, eh?" Farrand murmured at the table as he glanced up at the poker-playing cowboy. "Stranger in Tomahawk?"

"Just passin' through," Morgan agreed. "But I might tarry if I found somethin' interestin'."

"Depends on what yuh consider interestin," Jim Roan put in. "Good range hereabouts. Poker. Fine cattle, fair likker, and plenty purty gals."

"No excitement?" Morgan grinned. "Usually that's what a fiddle-footed cowboy's after."

"Cowboy, it must take a lot to excite you." Kirby Stone laughed. He glanced at Farrand and Roan, his lips quirking. "But speaking of excitement, yuh should have been here not so long ago when a Hopi named Johnny No-Luck brought in a skull and tried to swap it for a bottle of whisky. That caused some excitement, eh Nick?"

Farrand scowled at his cards. "There're better things to talk about, Kirby!" he growled.

"What, for instance?" Ben Jory had come up silently and now stood beside the runty cattle buyer, Roan. He was smiling cynically, and Morgan saw the challenge in his eyes. "We figgered it was a pretty good joke on you, Nick—drawin' a black deuce after yuh practically had the pot raked in. Yuh never did tell us just what happened when yuh got the Hopi

over to the bank."

Farrand stared flatly at the saloonman. "Maybe you know more about that than I do!" There was a note of accusation in his voice.

"Now—now, no bickering," the big rancher, Stone, remonstrated. "Besides, mebbe Morgan wouldn't be interested in anything so common as an old skull."

"But *this* skull was part gold!" Jory was still smiling, but there was something cold and reptilian about his inky eyes. "Mebbe it was worth the quart of firewater Johnny No-Luck wanted for it!"

Assuming a puzzled expression, Morgan had taken in all this. And now more than ever he was certain that behind this verbal fencing between the four supposed cronies lay something deadly. His alert mind had pounced on mention of the skull.

"A skull that's part gold, huh?" he drawled, in the tense silence that followed Jory's remark. "I reckon yuh mean it was gold-plated? What happened to it?"

"Why, that's what we wondered," Jim Roan said softly. "Mebbe you can figger it out, Morgan. Johnny No-Luck—his squaw cooks for Dave Slade's XL outfit—offered to swap the skull for a bottle of firewater like yuh heard. Nick here said he had a full quart of special stuff in his office over in the bank, so him and Johnny went over there. Pretty soon we heard a commotion, and a shot, and when we got over there Nick lay on the floor of his office with a knot the size of a goose egg on his head. The window was busted, and the skull had disappeared along with Johnny No-Luck. Neither has been seen since. What yuh make of it, Morgan?"

"I told you what happened," the banker said through clenched teeth. "Two men with handkerchiefs covering their faces sneaked into the office and got me cold. When I grabbed for a gun, one of them clubbed me over the head. I don't know who the men were, I don't know what became of Johnny No-Luck or the skull, and I don't know where he found the cursed thing. Now let's play poker!"

Kirby Stone laughed, slapped the banker on the shoulder.

"Anyhow, that's as good a story as any, Nick! Why worry about it? Johnny No-Luck's gone, and so is the gold-plated skull he valued at a quart of whiskey. . . . Yore deal, Morgan!"

But something had gone out of the game. There was no more good-natured banter, but rather an added tenseness and hostility. And in his mind Wayne Morgan could see huddled in the center of the table, as though emitting an insidious poison among the four former cronies, a ghastly, grinning skull!

It was now full night, and Waspy Bill had lighted the swinging lamps. Their garish glow splayed over the faces of the players, accentuating their tautness.

Morgan sat facing the street door, and so saw Tom Norbec as the rancher came between the batwings. Norbec paused a moment, his angry eyes slashing about the room until they paused at the table where Morgan sat.

THE Half Moon owner stalked up close to the table, and stopped. His square face was flushed in the lamplight, his eyes hot, his lips stretched tight across strong teeth. His flat gaze was on Nick Farrand.

In the silence that had come to the room, Norbec said bluntly: "I just brought two dead men into town. One of them is a skunk I dont' know, but who needed killin'. The other is Smoky Ord! That mean anything to anybody in this room?"

There was a moment of shocked silence.

Then somebody muttered, "Smoky Ord? That red-haired kid?"

Morgan sat with hands on table top, watching, listening. He saw the glances that passed between his fellow card-players—sharp, questioning, suspicious glances.

"Where did it happen, Tom, and how?" Kirby Stone asked then.

"Happened out in Thundergod Canyon," Norbec said, his gaze shifting from face to face. "Been some queer goin's-on in the canyon lately, and the kid and me had rode over there to have a look-see. We saw—" Norbec paused, his eyes narrowing, and Morgan knew he was thinking of Tana Slade. "We rode into a bunch of drygulchers in the storm. They cut Smoky down cold, without givin' him a chance, and nearly got me."

Stone said grimly, "If yuh saw who the buzzards was—'

"I saw 'em, but not plain—except

the dead one—and they were strangers. Likely some of the Hellgate scum. That's beside the point. Somebody hired' em to do it!"

"Yuh got any idea who, Tom?" Ben Jory purred.

"Mebbe, mebbe not! Anyway, they'd have got me too, if the Masked Rider and a friend of his hadn't bought chips."

"The Masked Rider!" Farrand spoke sharply. "I've heard of that hellion, but never in this part of the country. Are you sure it was him?"

"I'm shore," Norbec declared flatly. "Him and his pardner saved my bacon. The point is, Smoky Ord is dead, killed—and I'm thinkin' somebody in this room knows somethin' about it!"

"Easy, Tom!" Stone had risen to his feet. He placed a big hand placatingly on Norbec's shoulder. "Yuh got any reason to think that?"

"If yuh mean proof, no! But I'd stake my life that what happened in Thundergod Canyon today is tied in with that gold-plated skull that showed up right here in this room not long ago." The angry young rancher stared at Farrand. "And we all know who left this saloon with Johnny No-Luck and the skull!"

CHAPTER V

Trouble in Tomahawk

FARRAND'S spade-bearded face was pale in the lamplight. Anger stirred in his pale eyes.

"Don't accuse me of killing anybody, Norbec!" he warned sharply. "I've told what I know about what happened to the skull. The man who says I know more—or that I had anything to do with what has happened since—lies!"

"I'm not accusin' you, any more than I am some others!" Tom Norbec snapped, his gaze shifting to the dark, dudishly dressed saloonman. "Yore reputation's not lily-white, Jory!"

"Are yuh accusin' me of killin', Norbec?" Jory asked softly.

"If the boot fits, wear it!" It was obvious to Morgan that the Half Moon owner was letting his rage get the best of him. "I'm warnin' yuh—and everybody else it concerns—to stay off my land. Next time—"

"Yuh talk too much, Norbec!" snapped Jory. "Get out of here!"

"After I've had my say!"

"Now!" Jory spat. "Get—or draw!"

Norbec stared for an instant, then mumbled angrily, "I'm callin' yore bluff, tinhorn!"

His hand dropped lumberingly to the old range .45 he wore.

Jory's slim white hand struck like an enraged rattler at his pearl-handled gun.

But Wayne Morgan had moved even faster. He came up out of his chair, and sidewayed, slapping with his palm at Jory's gun arm. The pearl-handled gun was already free of leather—Jory was that fast—when Morgan's steel-thewed fingers clamped the wrist and shoved downward. The gun blasted into the floor.

JORY swore luridly, striking at Morgan with his free hand. But Morgan flung his other arm about the slim saloonman, pinning both Jory's arms to his side, and swung him about.

Kirby Stone had been slower to act, but he hadn't needed Morgan's speed. Norbec's gun was still in leather when Stone had run at him and grabbed him in a bear-like hug, preventing the draw.

Jory stopped struggling, but his black eyes remained coldly and furiously angry.

"Yuh can turn loose of me, Morgan," he said quietly.

Morgan released the saloonman and Jory stood quietly looking at Tom Norbec. Norbec's face was pale. Obviously he realized the narrowness of his escape. Old Waspy Bill put the scattergun he had snatched up back under the bar.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Jory." Wayne Morgan spoke quietly, but he was alert. "But I figgered two killin's today was enough. And I was right shore yuh'd be sorry for it later."

"Yuh're right Morgan," Jory said, stiff-lipped. "I would have been. I'm glad yuh stopped me. But I still don't like yore insinuations, Norbec. And my order still stands. Get out!"

Norbec nodded jerkily, to both Farrand and Jory.

"Maybe I went off half-cocked. I'm sorry."

"We're all edgy," Kirby Stone said gently. "But killin' is bad business in my book. If yuh need help, Tom, I'll back yuh to the last cartridge on the Bar X!"

"Thanks," Norbec said briefly, and turned and left.

Morgan knew there would be no more poker this night. Stone, Farrand, Roan—all were on their feet. There was a strained, suffocating feeling of tension over all the room.

"A bad thing," Kirby Stone repeated. "Like I said, I'm sidin' Tom Norbec. If it hadn't been for the Masked Rider and his Injun pard, Norbec would be lyin' on a slab beside Smoky Ord right now. There's a rotten mess in this valley—has been for a time—and I'll play no more poker until its cleaned up and stopped. I'm no paragon of virtue, but neither am I a filth-eatin' buzzard. Good-evening, gentlemen!"

The Bar X owner strode from the saloon.

"The fools!" Farrand said, with bitter vehemence.

"*Quien sabe?*" Jory murmured, once more smiling. "Set up the drinks on the house, Waspy Bill!"

Morgan downed his drink, and five minutes later was on the street. Tomahawk consisted of one long main street. Morgan paused, looking both ways along it. It was dark except for shafts of light slashing from doors and windows. He was looking for Tom Norbec.

Spiked heels clumped along the plank walk.

"Which way to the funeral parlor, cowboy?" Morgan asked.

HE WAS given directions, and went on along the street, turning in at a lighted doorway. Two still figures lay on canvas-covered slabs. Several men, including Tom Norbec, were in the undertaking parlor.

Morgan waited until Norbec turned to leave, then fell in step beside him. Norbec jerked up his head, nodded.

"Thanks, feller, for what yuh done," he said. "I'd have been cold meat now shore. Jory meant to salt me. Name's Morgan, ain't it?"

"That's right. I was takin' the north trail, and figgered if you were headin' out we might ride together."

"*'Sta bueno!* I was headin' for the livery to get my hoss."

"Mine's at the same place."

They were on a dark section of the town when they stepped from the walk into the dust of the street and started angling diagonally across toward the livery stable. They were almost in the middle of the street, when a soft voice called:

"Senor! The alley to your left!"

Instantly, Morgan flung himself sideward, slamming violently into Norbec and knocking him to the ground.

From an alley to their left and slightly ahead, two guns blasted simultaneously, slashing purple-red fingers of flame at them. Bullets snarled through the air in exactly the spot where they had stood an instant before.

The momentum of Morgan's headlong dive had carried the two of them almost to the plank walk. He crawled frantically over it, pulling Norbec with him. The guns were still pounding, the bullets making a vicious trail in the dust as they sought their target.

But now Blue Hawk's rifle was blazing and hammering in the mouth of another alley across the street, its echoes brawling among Tomahawk buildings.

They were behind the plank walk now and they flattened against the ground, their faces grinding into the dust. Morgan could hear the ripping sound of the bullets as they cut into the sidewalk inches from his head.

He had finally managed to get one of his guns free. He lifted himself slightly and smashed lead into the dark alley, aiming at the reb blobs of flame. Off to his right Blue Hawk's rifle still cracked and echoed.

Then, abruptly, the gunshots in the alley to their left ceased. Pounding footsteps sounded, growing fainter and fainter.

Morgan leaped to his feet. Guns in hand, he ran straight at the mouth of the alley, aware that the bounding figure of Blue Hawk was converging on the same goal. They plunged into the black maw between the two buildings, but stumbled over a mass of debris and crashed headlong.

By the time they had untangled themselves, the boot thuds had died away. Pur-

suit would be hopeless, even if there were not the danger of running into an ambush.

"Are you all right, Senor?" the Yaqui asked anxiously.

"All right, Hawk, thanks to yore warnin'. That drygulch lead, I'm shore, was meant for Norbec and not me. But he wasn't hit, either." Morgan finished swiftly, "Here comes Norbec now. I'm ridin' part way home with him. I got an idea I'm goin' to find out somethin' powerful interestin'. Yuh remember where the trail dips across a creek where big cottonwoods line the banks?"

"*Si*, Senor!"

"Meet me there, with Midnight, just as soon as yuh can."

The Yaqui faded back into the deeper shadows, just as Tom Norbec ran with drawn gun into the alley.

"Morgan?" the young rancher called.

"Here!" Morgan answered. "The 'gulchin' hellions, whoever they were, got away."

"That's twice tonight yuh saved me from joinin' Smoky Ord," Norbec declared feelingly. "I won't forget it. Somehow I'll show yuh!"

"Forget it!" Morgan said roughly. "Them shots made a lot of racket. Here comes a whole slew on the run. You crave to answer a lot of fool questions?"

"No need," Norbec grunted. "We can go through this alley and circle back to the livery."

This they did, stumbling through the trash-littered dark behind the long row of buildings, then threading another alley to the street, bawling questions back and forth. Nobody knew what the shooting had been about.

MORGAN and Tom Norbec saddled their horses—Morgan's was a powerful hammer-headed roan—mounted, and rode slowly out of town, taking the north trail that led toward Norbec's Half Moon ranch and Thundergod Canyon.

"Morgan, them bullets back there were meant for me," Norbec said abruptly, after they had ridden a mile in silence. "Somebody wants me dead!"

"That's right. But *why* do they want yuh dead?"

"You just curious, Morgan—or yuh got a special reason for wantin' to know?"

"Mebbe I've got a special reason. I already know about what happened in Thundergod Canyon today, from the Masked Rider. I'm a friend of his, and sometimes I work with him. He told me he was buyin' chips in this game, so if yuh're on the right side yuh're playin' in luck. Anything that yuh tell me I'll take to the Masked Rider. Yuh can trust him."

"I'd be a simple fool not to trust the Masked Rider—and you, too, Morgan—after what's happened durin' the last few hours. I'm due to be buzzard bait three times over. Shoot!"

"That gold-plated skull that Johnny No-Luck tried to swap for a bottle of whiskey is behind all this, ain't it?"

"Yes—that is, I'm reasonably shore of it."

"Tell me about that skull. Who wore it when it had hair on it and a man underneath?"

"A hellion named Devil Dan Tolliver," Norbec said grimly. "Ever hear of him?"

"An outlaw, wasn't he?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Yes, one of the worst the West ever knew. But before that Dan Tolliver was somethin' else. To understand that we'll have to go back about fifteen years, when Dan Tolliver—still a young man—was a town-taming marshal over in Texas. Tolliver was salty, but straight, standin' four-square for law and order. Single-handed, he cleaned up half a dozen wolf towns, and if he ever took a dirty dollar nobody knew about it.

"Then one day, in a fight with a crew of owlhooters, Dan Tolliver got a bad head wound. He almost died. The bullet was lodged in his skull and pressing against the brain, the medico in that little frontier Texas town said. He said there was one chance in a thousand he could save the marshal's life, by trepannin' the skull, removin' some of it where the bullet was lodged and puttin' in a metal disk. This the old medico did—so the story goes—usin' what instruments he had, and part of a gold coin, because that was what he happened to have handy."

"And the operation was a success?"

"Depends on how yuh look at it," Norbec declared. "Dan Tolliver lived, all right, even got well—in his body. But he never wore another law badge. From the day of that operation Dan Tolliver was a changed man. Instead of an honest, law-abidin' gent he became a human fiend, a gun-crazy demon who lived only to kill and rob!"

CHAPTER V

Secret of the Skull

RIDING along at a moderate pace, Wayne Morgan listened attentively as Tom Norbec talked. Tomahawk dropped farther behind them. To the north and west low, blunt hills showed darkly in the golden light of an almost full moon. The ground underfoot was still spongy.

"I've heard of such things happenin'," Morgan admitted when he had been told of the operation on Dan Tolliver's head. "Looks like the gold plate the medico spliced into Tolliver's skull just made more pressure on his brain, or maybe made a new kind. It jerked a kink in his brain."

"Anyway," Norbec went on, "almost as quick as Tolliver was on his feet, he pulled a hold-up and killed a man. He seemed to go kill-crazy. Chased out of Texas, he came here to Arizona, bringin' the crew of cut-throats he'd got together with him. By that time he had become known as Devil Dan, because nothin' seemed too cruel or hellish for him to do. Nobody ever found their hideout, but it was thought it was in the roughs up above Thundergod Canyon, or mebbe inside the canyon. From wherever it was Devil Dan made his raids over half the state of Arizona. He robbed trains, banks, looted ranches and gold trains. Nobody knows how much these raids brought him and his gang. And always, after each one, they came back to this neck of the woods with their loot."

"And none of it was ever recovered?"

"Not a dollar of it, so far as I know! That went on for almost five years. It was a raid on Farrand's bank right here in Tomahawk that finally wiped out Devil Dan's hellions. Somehow, news that the bank was to be raided leaked out, and a big posse was layin' for 'em. The street was littered with dead men that day! Every man of Devil Dan's crew was blasted from the saddle—except Devil Dan himself, and he got away bad wounded and leakin' blood like a stuck boar.

"A posse followed Devil Dan's trail into Thundergod Canyon. They found his hoss there, but there was no sign of Devil Dan. They never did find him. It was like he had sunk into the ground or sprouted wings and flew. It was anybody's guess what had become of him. Mebbe he crawled into some cave and died. Mebbe he'd lived and got away by some secret route. Nobody knew for shore which."

"Up until a little while ago," Wayne Morgan said softly, "when Johnny No-Luck tried to swap a gold-plated skull for a bottle of whiskey!"

"That's right." Norbec nodded and touched a match to a quirly. "The day of the fight in Tomahawk, one of Devil Dan's men hadn't died for a couple of hours, and he'd done some talkin'. This gent claimed Devil Dan had given his men half the loot they collected, keepin' the other half for himself. This loot, the dyin' outlaw

claimed, Devil Dan had cached in some secret place that nobody knew about but him. He said Devil Dan had awful headaches and would lose his memory every once in a while, and because he was afraid he'd forget where he'd cached his loot Devil Dan had written down on a piece of paper where his cache was.

"This map, or whatever it was, Devil Dan kept in a watch he always wore—full of jewels, it was. This watch, and its secret, disappeared with Devil Dan into Thundergod Canyon the day he rode out of Tomahawk wounded and dyin'."

"It begins to track," Morgan murmured. "The skull wasn't important. But wherever the skull was, should have been the rest of Devil Dan's skeleton, and the watch which held the key to a rich loot cache!"

"Right again," the Half Moon owner agreed. "That gold-plated skull Johnny No-Luck brought in was proof that Devil Dan had died. That was why Johnny No-Luck suddenly got to be such an important man. Likely the rest of Devil Dan's skeleton had been near where the Hopi had picked up that skull. I wasn't in the Taos Queen that night, but I know that Johnny balked at tellin' where he'd found the skull."

MORGAN asked a question.

"Farrand took the Indian over to his bank office?"

"Yes, but Farrand swears that the Hopi claimed he couldn't remember where he found the skull. Farrand says two masked men broke into the office, clubbed him over the head—and that was the last he remembered. That part seems to be straight, anyway. And it's a fact that Johnny No-Luck and the skull disappeared that night and, so far as I know, neither has been seen or heard of since. *Somebody* knows what happened to 'em, but I don't."

"Where does Tana Slade fit into this?" Morgan asked abruptly.

"I'm not shore about that either." Norbec's voice was troubled. "Johnny's squaw cooks for the X L, the Slade outfit. The Hopi stayed there when he wasn't roamin' the hills or beggin' drinks in town. Mebbe he showed Tana and her father the skull, mebbe even told 'em where he found it. Anyway, Tana seems like a different girl ever since that night. She won't tell me anything, won't even hardly stay still long enough to talk to me. Somethin's got into her, like—like an evil spirit, almost."

"Gold works that way sometimes," Morgan said. "The Masked Rider told me she was in Thundergod Canyon, that you admitted she'd been there before. It's plain she's lookin' for Devil Dan's loot cache, along with some others. But why should anybody want to kill her?"

"I think they want only to take her prisoner. They think Johnny No-Luck told her where he found the skull."

"But if that's the case why hasn't she found the loot cache long ago?"

"I don't know!" Norbec's voice was ragged with worry. "I only know she's in some kind of danger, and she won't let me in on it so I can protect her. That's really why I was in the canyon today."

Morgan took a deep breath. "A few folks seem to overlook the fact that if that loot is found it won't belong to them but to the folks it was stolen from."

"But that don't stop 'em, nor killin' either!" the rancher said savagely. "Findin' a loot cache won't bring back Smoky Ord."

"Yuh got any idea who's behind the gang that 'bushed you and Smoky today? The Masked Rider says he heard one of 'em mention 'Boss.' Say, yuh talked pretty rough to Farrand and Ben Jory."

"Mebbe that was a mistake," Norbec said quickly. "It's just that Farrand seemed so anxious to get the secret out of Johnny No-Luck that night, mebbe did for all I know. Jory was after it, too, and Jory's reputation ain't so good. Neither of 'em is particular how he makes a dollar."

"How about Kirby Stone and the cattle buyer?"

"Kirby Stone's Bar X is the biggest outfit in the valley. Stone's plenty salty, but straight. I don't know about Jim Roan. Supposed to represent a Denver syndicate, but he's been here quite a while and I don't know of many cattle he's bought."

Five minutes later Morgan halted the roan.

"I'm takin' a short-cut to my camp from here, Norbec. Mebbe I'll be seein' yuh again."

The rancher held out his hand.

"Thanks again for what yuh done,

feller," he said solemnly. "If yuh see the Masked Rider, tell him what I've just told yuh. Mebbe he can help."

"I'll tell him," Morgan promised.

He watched as Norbec rode on along the moon-splashed trail, then turned the roan and rode back the way he had come. Ten minutes previously they had splashed across a tiny stream, the banks of which were densely lined with giant cottonwoods. Reaching this spot, Morgan dismounted, drank from the cold stream, then drew back into the shadows of the cottonwoods to wait. Blue Hawk had hardly had sufficient time to ride to Thundergod Canyon, three miles to the north, and return here.

As he sat there in the shadows, smoking a quirly, Wayne Morgan reviewed the events of the last few hours. At least a part of the picture had now been brought into sharp focus.

Discovery by Johnny No-Luck of the golden skull had fired the greed of some man—or men—and the hunt for Devil Dan's rich treasure trove was on. That in itself was no crime, although the loot, if found, would lawfully belong to its original owners. But now cold-blooded killing had stepped into the game. Tana Slade was in deadly danger, as was Tom Norbec.

THE man behind this well-organized search for Devil Dan's loot was no law-abiding citizen, but a ruthless criminal who would kill again and again to gain his ends. The mystery held possibilities for incalculable evil.

Where did Tana Slade fit into the puzzle? Why was she trying so desperately to find the ill-gotten loot? It was obvious that whether or not the Hopi had revealed to her where he had found the skull, she had not yet uncovered the cache. It was just as obvious that, so long as others *thought* she possessed that knowledge, she was in danger.

The low gutteral call of a mountain lion sounded in the shadows. Morgan answered with a like cry, and a moment later Blue Hawk rode along the stream, riding a gray and leading the black stallion, Midnight.

"I came as quickly as I could, Senor," the Yaqui murmured.

"No hurry, Hawk," said Morgan. "The night's still young."

Quickly Morgan donned the black cape and domino mask of the Masked Rider, meanwhile briefly explaining to the Yaqui what he had learned from Tom Norbec.

"You go now to talk with the Senorita Tana?" Blue Hawk asked shrewdly.

"That's right. I think she can clear up some points, if she can be persuaded."

"And the Masked Rider is an excellent persuader."

"Not always, I'm afraid, where women are concerned. Anyway, I don't expect any trouble. Wait for me at the cave."

Without waiting for an answer, the Masked Rider spoke softly to the big black and moved back toward the trail. He had received explicit directions from Norbec on how to reach the XL, without Norbec's realizing he had given the information.

Twenty minutes later the black-clad man approached a cluster of buildings in the center of which huddled a squat, rambling old ranchhouse. Light glowed in a front room of the building. The other shedlike structures were dark and quiet in the moonlight. A peaceful enough scene, the Robin Hood rider thought whimsically.

He approached without stealth, for his mission here was peaceable, headed past an open-fronted toolshed toward a tie-rack in front of the ranch-house. But suddenly, as he came even with the shed, he swayed violently and flung himself headlong from the saddle.

At the same instant the world seemed to explode in a red, cyclonic burst of fury directly before him. Twin streamers of fire fanged over his shoulder so close he felt their hot kiss of death on his cheek.

CHAPTER VII

Boot Hill Debt

AN INSTANT before the blast the Masked Rider's sensitive ears had heard twin clicks, and he had glimpsed a shadowy figure crouched just inside the tool shed. Instant action had kept him from being blown from the saddle by the double-barreled shotgun.

As it was his headlong dive carried him beneath the lethal charges of flame and buckshot. His throat was scorched, his ears were roaring with the force of

the detonation, as his driving shoulder hit the crouched figure and drove it savagely backward to the ground.

He heard a moaning gasp. He struck some solid object, recoiled, and clawed to his feet, one of the black guns in hand. He leaped forward with the clubbed gun upraised.

But something held back the blow.

The shadowy figure was groping about on hands and knees, obviously searching for the fallen shotgun—and to the Masked Rider's ears came the sound of choked, furious sobs!

"The gun's empty, Tana," the masked man said quietly. "Anyway, you won't need it. I won't hurt you. I'm the Masked Rider."

"No need to lie!" the girl said fiercely. "I know why you're here. I was expecting—somebody—and waited here. I tried to kill you, and I wish I had!"

"Look, Miss Slade." The black-clad man stepped from the shed into the white flood of moonlight. "I told you the truth. I want to help you. Do you know what happened in Thundergod Canyon today?"

The sobbing stopped and in the short silence that followed the Masked Rider knew that Tana Slade was appraising him.

"I heard what happened," she said, then. "The Masked Rider saved Tom Norbec's life. If you're really the Masked Rider—"

"I am," he assured her. "And I think you need help even more than Tom Norbec does."

She drew a shuddering breath. "I . . . Yes, I need help. I've been so—alone. And frightened, too, although I wouldn't let Daddy know."

"Tana!" a voice called anxiously from the house. "Are you all right, girl? What happened?"

"I'm all right, Dad," Tana Slade called back, coming into the moonlight. "I'll be right in!"

She looked questioningly at the Masked Rider. Even dressed in denims, shirt and boots as she was, the masked man saw that she was breathtakingly beautiful. In the moonlight her hair seemed to be alive with coiling flames.

"I'm calling you, Masked Rider," she said. "Shall we go in?"

For answer, after placing Midnight inside the shed, the Robin Hood rider fell in step beside her. They crossed the wide porch, went into a hallway and on into the big lighted front room where Dave Slade sat in his wheel-chair. A .30-30 Winchester lay across the invalid's lap.

The upper portion of Slade's thick body jerked convulsively as he saw the black-garbed figure, and he half-raised the rifle.

"You scum, if yuh've hurt my daughter I'll cut yuh to shreds!" the cripple said harshly. "Tana, who is this, and what was the—"

"Daddy!" the girl said sharply, seizing his rifle barrel and pushing it downward. "This is the Masked Rider, and he wants to help us."

"The Masked Rider, eh?" Dave Slade glared his suspicion and distrust. "I've heard of him. I've heard he's a thievin', killin' wolf who kills just to see a man waller in his own blood. What do yuh want here, Masked Rider?"

The Masked Rider had stood quietly, imperturbed by the stern-faced rancher's tirade. He was accustomed to such accusations.

"Daddy, you're wrong!" Tana cried. "He saved Tom this morning and I think—"

"Never mind, Miss Slade," the Masked Rider interrupted quietly.

HE SEATED himself in a chair facing Dave Slade.

For ten minutes he talked in a deep, quiet, melodious voice. He named a score of instances when he had fought on the side of right and justice. And at the end of the ten minutes, Dave Slade smiled and thrust out a big hand.

"I'm convinced, Masked Rider! When yuh say yuh want to help us in this mess, I'm takin' yuh at yore word."

"I want to help yuh if yuh're on the right side," the Masked Rider demurred. "It's yore turn to convince *me!*"

Tana said, "It started when Johnny No-Luck—"

"I know about that, up till Johnny and the skull disappeared from Nick Farrand's office. And I know about Devil Dan's loot cache. Have yuh found it?"

"No! And I'm beginning to think I never will!"

"If yuh did, what then? Do yuh think yuh'd have a right to keep it?"

"Only part of it," Slade rumbled. "Eight thousand dollars, to be exact. Tell him, Tana!"

THE girl told him the story quietly, but with deep emotion in her husky voice:

"For over five years Dad's waking hours have been spent in that wheel-chair. Devil Dan Tolliver did that to him. The X L was a lot bigger then than it is today, more prosperous. On a day more than five years ago Dad and three riders had driven a herd of prime beef to railhead up at Wapiti and got paid off in cash—eight thousand dollars in large bills. Because he meant to pay off a small note he owed at the Tomahawk bank, and buy some feeders with the rest, he paid off his riders and started home with the cash in a money-belt. But he didn't get here with it.

"On a rough section of the trail he was stopped by a lone unmasked bandit. The bandit was Devil Dan Tolliver. He took the eight thousand dollars—and shot Dad from the saddle in cold blood, laughed, and rode off. Dad lay there several hours before he was found. When a doctor finally found him, he said the bullet had done something to Daddy's spine, that he would never walk again. A month later Devil Dan's gang was lured into a trap and wiped out in Tomahawk—but that didn't help us!"

"They brought me home, broke and a cripple," Dave Slade took up the tale grimly. "For five years I've sat here, helpless, watching my girl slave and fight to hold things together, watchin' greedy neighbors move in on me. Today the X L is no more'n a fourth of what it was. And I'm still broke, still owe Farrand's bank money, still a cripple."

"But you wouldn't be for long, if we could just get back that cow money Devil Dan stole from you!" Tana said quickly. She turned impulsively to the stern-faced Masked Rider. "You see, we've found that Dad *can* be cured, if we had five thousand dollars to send him to Chicago for an operation by a spine specialist. That's why I've been trying so hard to find Devil Dan's loot cache."

The man in black nodded soberly.

"I reckon yuh'd be due the eight thousand, all right. Yuh don't know what became of the gold-plated skull?"

"Oh, yes—we have it! I'll show you."

Tana got quickly to her feet and left the room.

When she returned, she held in her tanned hands a gleaming white, leering human skull!

The Masked Rider examined the thing curiously. Except for the sliver of gold embedded in the crown there was nothing unusual about the skull.

He placed it on the table beside the lamp where it grinned at them with grim and evil mockery.

"After Johnny No-Luck escaped from Farrand's office that night, by diving through a window, he came here," Tana explained. "He said *malo hombres* were after him, meant to kill him. He begged us to hide him. Instead, we gave him a fresh horse, and what money we had, and he left. He'd been gone less than five minutes when two masked men—the same ones who had come to Farrand's office, I suppose—came here to this room. They didn't mention the skull, but demanded that we tell them where the Hopi was hiding.

"We denied that Johnny had been here. They must have known we were lying, for they found his pony, but after searching the place they left. I don't know who they were."

"A pity the Hopi didn't tell yuh where he uncovered the skull."

"He did, the exact spot," Tana declared quickly. "At the base of a wall in Thundergod Canyon, half covered with shale and sand."

"And the rest of the skeleton?" the Masked Rider asked tensely.

"It wasn't there!" Tana said positively. "I found the imprint of the skull in the sand just where Johnny No-Luck said he had found it. I dug and searched, but the skeleton just isn't there. I've searched the floor of the whole canyon, time and again, even searched every cave along the base of the walls." There was hopelessness in her voice and her shoulders slumped dejectedly as she went on, "It's there somewhere—it *has* to be! And with the skeleton is the watch that holds the secret of Devil Dan's cache."

AT THE Masked Rider's suggestion, she described the spot where the skull had been found, so that he knew he would be able to find the place when he investigated.

"I'll have a look-see tomorrow," he promised. "Did yuh recognize the toughs

who were after yuh in the canyon this mornin'?"

She looked startled. "You—knew I was there? But naturally you would, if you saved Tom Norbec. I heard the shots as I rode out of the canyon. No, I didn't recognize the men who were after me, although I'd seen some of them before, prowling around the canyon. I think they're from Hellgate, that owl-hoot settlement up in the hills."

"And they're after the bandit loot?"

"Yes—only I'm certain they're working for somebody else, somebody here in the valley."

"Nick Farrand!" Slade growled. "Or Ben Jory. I don't trust either of them jiggers."

"We have no proof of that, Dad," Tana said quickly. "It could as easily be Kirby Stone, or any of half a dozen other men. And that cattle buyer Jim Roan, remember, has hinted several times that he'd make it worth our while to tell him where Johnny No-Luck is."

"That's the trouble," the rancher said bitterly. "Everybody seems to think we know the secret of the cache—and we don't. They keep prowlin' around the ranch, and pesterin' Tana. I'm afraid they'll—"

"Yuh've got reason to be afraid," the masked man said earnestly, as the invalid rancher paused. "What happened in Thundergod Canyon today proves that. We're up against somebody who won't stop at killin'—or torture—to get what they want. They think you two have uncovered Devil Dan's secret. So both of yuh're in danger till this is cleared up."

"Don't matter what happens to me," Slade muttered. "But if they hurt my girl, I'll—"

"It'd be too late to do anything, after it happened," the Masked Rider said crisply, getting to his feet. "I'd advise yuh to stay close to the ranch, Miss Tana. Above all, don't go back to Thundergod Canyon. I have a friend, a Yaqui Indian named Blue Hawk. I'll send Blue Hawk here in the morning, to kind of keep an eye on things for a while. *Adios!*"

The black-clad figure turned abruptly and vanished through the doorway. In a moment or so they heard a thunder of hoofs as the black stallion raced away.

BLUE HAWK

CHAPTER VIII

Boot Hill's Secret

SOON after dawn the next morning Wayne Morgan saddled the roan and left the grottolike cave which was his hideout. Blue Hawk had already departed for the X L.

A dense coiling mist filled Thundergod Canyon. Except when the fog shifted visibility was only a few yards. Morgan knew that until the mist was dissipated searching for anything in the canyon would be useless.

Chaffing at inaction, he left the canyon and angled up the side of a timbered ridge, riding slowly along the east canyon rim toward the spot where the walls pinched in and became a narrow gash in the earth with a rushing stream at its bottom. Up here there was no mist. The country was rough, timbered, slashed by ravines.

Back from the canyon the hills rose, tier on dark tier. Somewhere up there was the settlement of Hellgate, outlaw stronghold.

Morgan rode slowly, eyes wary, staying as near as possible to the canyon rim. Below him the canyon was like a smoke-filled cauldron, with the tallest spires jutting like snaggled teeth up through the coiling mist.

He didn't know just why he was making this pasear along the canyon rim, except to kill time until the mist cleared from the canyon itself. But he couldn't get it out of his mind that the gold-plated skull, having been found at the foot of the walls, might have been dislodged and tumbled from the rim.

So he kept his eyes alertly on the ground for the gleam of bleached bones. And found nothing. He came to the spot where the walls pinched in abruptly, and hundreds of feet below he could hear but not see the rushing stream. He continued on along the rim for another quarter-mile.

It was then that he heard the harsh baying of what sounded like a pack of hounds. Then he came suddenly upon a cabin, huddled in a thicket-hemmed clearing back three hundred yards from the canyon rim. Behind the cabin was a large pole corral.

The walls of the cabin were made of the slab-rock which cluttered the surrounding earth in abundance. The roof was of poles and sod. Several gaunt hounds, tied to the corral poles, tugged at their leashes and howled at Morgan as he rode into the clearing.

A man came from the stone cabin and stood looking at Morgan with a surly scowl. He was a burly, thick-shouldered hombre with a beaked nose, an unkempt sandy beard and muddy little eyes. In the crook of his arm he held a Winchester.

"Howdy, stranger," Morgan greeted, and grinned amiably.

"What yuh want here?" the burly man growled.

"Why, I was out for a ride and happened to see yore cabin. Didn't mean to intrude. The name's Morgan."

Still scowling, the burly man said grudgingly, "Hogan's my monicker—Cat Hogan, some folks call me, likely because I hunt and trap the big varmints that roam these hills. Bounty on their pelts, yuh know."

Morgan nodded. "No cougars for me. Them hounds yuh got there kill the critters?"

"Just tree 'em. One of them big cats'd rip a whole pack to pieces if it got amongst 'em." The suspicion remained in "Cat" Hogan's muddy eyes. "What yuh say yuh was doin' up here?"

"Why just ridin'."

"Funny place to ride! Not any too healthful, either. Work for some outfit hereabouts?"

"Just driftin' through."

"Then maybe yuh better start driftin'. Yuh're gettin' my hounds all stirred up."

Morgan didn't miss the note of warning in Cat Hogan's voice. Three hundred yards away he could hear faintly the hollow booming of the water in the chasm. The hounds continued their howling.

It was plain that Cat Hogan didn't like company. The feeling was mutual, for about the place there was an unclean smell, probably from the rotting carcasses of skinned cougars, that Morgan didn't like.

"Shore, *amigo*," he apologized. "Didn't mean to trespass.

He turned the roan and rode back the way he had come. The sun was high in

the sky now, and he figured that the mist in the canyon would be thinning.

HE WAS right. Except along the stream at the base of the west wall the mist had vanished. Morgan rode into the canyon and along the base of the east wall, and by careful study of landmarks as described by Tana Slade found without much difficulty the spot where Johnny No-Luck had uncovered the golden skull.

Dismounting, he studied the spot carefully. The towering wall was sheer and unclimbable. At its base was a conglomerate mass of shale, rock and sand. Near the edge of this mass, according to Tana, was where the Hopi had found the skull half-covered by sand and shale.

There was evidence that the immediate vicinity had been thoroughly explored, probably by Tana Slade. But, to make sure, Morgan had his own look-see. An hour later, he was forced to admit that Tana had done a good job.

There was no sign of Devil Dan's skeleton.

Morgan retreated to a patch of boulders where he sat down in the shade to figure the problem. The sky was clear today, and the sun's rays made heat boil up from the damp earth. Several buzzards circled ceaselessly over the canyon low over the walls.

Morgan tried to picture in his mind the flight of Devil Dan Tolliver, carrying his death wounds, into this canyon. The horse had been found, but the man had mysteriously vanished. There were crevices and potholes, into one of which Devil Dan might have fallen and died. There were caves along the base of the walls. But Tana, and probably others, had thoroughly searched these caves and crevices.

Morgan's gaze shifted to the walls towering at the east side of the canyon. There seemed not a spot where they might conceivably be scaled by a well man, let alone one who was dying. If Devil Dan had attempted this his skeleton would have been lying at the base of the wall.

But where had the skull come from?

Morgan's gaze idly watched the buzzards as they wheeled and dipped over the canyon. The skull, he realized, might have been brought by one of those buzzards to the spot where it had been found. Or by a coyote, or flood waters.

The task of finding Devil Dan's skeleton seemed hopelessly complicated.

The buzzards were lower now, and almost directly over the spot where Morgan sat. They kept circling and dipping. Morgan watched them curiously. Occasionally one of them would dip below the canyon rim, craning its scrawy neck to peer downward.

What interested Wayne Morgan was that each time they dipped it was at identically the same place, but they never lit. That spot, forty or fifty feet below the canyon rim, seemed to hold an odd fascination for the vultures.

Morgan's eyes explored the wall with renewed interest. For almost a hundred feet above the canyon floor it was sheer, and as smooth as if a giant knife had slashed across it. Obviously at one time that huge mass of shale and rock had been part of the wall, but had ripped loose and crashed into the canyon.

Before this, had the wall been sheer, or had it been broken and pitted, possibly scalable? Above that smooth expanse now the wall appeared rough and laced by crevices clear to the rim.

With a queer excitement building inside him, Morgan watched another buzzard dip sharply at that same spot, peer downward, then flap its wings lumberingly as it soared upward again.

At the spot, Morgan now saw what appeared to be a narrow rock ledge protruding outward from the cliff.

He got to his feet. Only one thing held attraction for buzzards—carrion, or the promise of carrion. What was on that rock ledge? Not carrion, or the buzzards would light and gorge themselves instead of flapping away in disappointment.

Sun-bleached bones?

Expectancy had Morgan's nerves tightly drawn now. He saw instantly that there was no possible chance of reaching the ledge from the canyon floor. That left but one alternative.

Marking the spot carefully by a gnarled pine that dangled drunkenly from the canyon rim almost directly over the ledge, Morgan mounted the roan and circled out of the canyon, taking the same route over which he had ridden earlier in the morning up the side of the timbered slope to the canyon rim. Within thirty minutes he drew up at the base of the twisted pine

that jutted out over the canyon.

He knelt and peered over the rim. Fifty feet below he could see the outer rim of a rock ledge. If there was anything on the ledge he couldn't see it. But he knew it was the same ledge he had seen the buzzards dip at from below.

MORGAN took his sixty-foot lass rope from the saddle, tied one end to a sapling back several feet from the rim, letting the remainder of the rope dangle into the canyon. Then, stabbing a quick look about the vicinity, he took hold of the rope and swung himself over the rim.

He let himself down slowly, fighting impatience. Gradually the rim rose above him. Hundreds of feet below he could see the boulder-studded canyon floor. The buzzards dipped curiously, croaking at him with harsh disapproval.

Morgan thought he saw it now. That huge mass had caved from the cliff during the last three or four years. Before that it had been—or appeared to have been—scalable. Devil Dan Tolliver, cornered, desperate and wounded, had seized upon it as his only chance of escape. Or was that just a wild idea?

The rock ledge was directly below Morgan now. It was possibly forty feet long and no more than five in width, and cluttered with boulders. The rope was barely long enough to let his boots touch the ledge.

He braced himself, turned loose of the rope.

Almost the first thing he saw, wedged between a boulder and the wall, was a human skeleton! All but the skull. The skull was missing. Wayne Morgan knew then that here before him lay all that remained of Devil Dan Tolliver.

Feeling a queer lack of excitement now, he moved along the treacherous ledge toward the skeleton. The bones, rotting from the effects of rain and wind and sun, came unjointed as he touched them. He poked gingerly about among them.

There were the rotting remnants of crossed gun-belts, with a pair of rusted .45s still in the disintergrating holsters. A knife blade, and several gold coins.

And, underneath the mass, dangling from a chain, a gold watch with its still intact crystal rimmed with tiny jewels!

Morgan picked up the watch, turning it curiously in his hands. Here was final proof. He crouched there, feeling the pounding heat of the sun, hearing the outraged croaks of the buzzards, the world and its wickedness and violence seeming a vast distance away.

From a concealed sheath in one of his boots Morgan took a small but keen-bladed knife, and with its point he pried open the back of the watch. Inside the watch was a tiny, folded piece of paper. Eagerly he unfolded the paper.

Scrawled on the slip of paper with pencil, but plainly legible, were six words:

SPIRIT CAVE. THE DEVIL HAS HORNS.

Morgan stared at the cryptic words, frowning. They meant nothing to him. Yet undoubtedly here was the key to the hiding place of Devil Dan's loot.

Where was Spirit Cave? And what was meant by "The Devil has Horns?" Morgan crouched there for moments, studying the paper, trying to make sense out of what was written on it. Inside him was a gouging disappointment. If Devil Dan had made a map instead of using those meaningless words, it would have been different.

But that had been the wily bandit leader's method of balking anybody who might come into possession of the paper. *He* had known what the mysterious words meant.

Finally, unable to puzzle it out, and having memorized the words, Morgan tore the paper into tiny shreds and let them flutter into space. Then he started the return climb to the rim. Nothing further could be gained by tarrying here. He would feel safer with solid earth under his feet.

Ten minutes later, his toes in a crevice, he flung an elbow over the rim. As he started to pull himself upward, a cold, snarling voice slashed at him:

"Come up slow and careful, bucko! My trigger finger's nervous as a cougar's whiskers!"

A CACTUS CITY STORY
THE GLORIOUS FOURTH
By L. P. HOLMES
NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER IX

Cave of the Devils

MORGAN froze motionless, knowing that in that strained, awkward position he was helpless. Directly before him, sitting on a boulder and with the rifle in his huge hands trained full on Morgan, was the burly, beak-nosed Cat Hogan.

On the cat hunter's beefy lips was a mocking, sneering grin.

"Yuh pick the funniest places to take rides, cowboy!" he jeered. "What yuh doin climbin about on that wall?"

"Lookin' for buzzard eggs," Morgan said calmly.

Hogan blinked muddy eyes. "Lookin' for buzzard eggs? What in thunderation for?"

"I aim to start me a buzzard ranch," Morgan explained, straight-faced. "Ever eat stewed buzzard seasoned with garlic and garnished with onions and mushrooms? Thought not. Personal, I don't care for it—it tastes too much like buzzard. But it's sweepin' the East like wildfire. There's a fortune in it!"

Morgan was deliberately playing for time, while he slid his left hand, still below the canyon rim, into the pocket that held the jewel-encrusted watch he had taken from among Devil Dan's bones. There was a chance that the thick-brained cat hunter would not suspect his real reason for climbing down the wall.

He dropped the watch, at the same time dislodging some shale with his foot to cover the clatter it made.

"Buzzard ranch, huh?" Hogan snarled suddenly. "Yuh'll be feedin' buzzards, all right if yuh move crooked. Climb up here!"

Morgan obeyed. Hogan had him cold.

There was a chance that the cat hunter had no connection with the puzzle he was trying to unravel, and that, naturally suspicious and hostile toward strangers, Hogan merely wished to get rid of a prowler in his domain.

Hogan took Morgan's guns. The big cougar hunter might be dumb, or not, but he gave Morgan no chance to make a play. Morgan didn't relish being made a prisoner, but he was curious. What lay behind Hogan's actions?

"Step out, back toward the cabin," Hogan growled. "The Boss'll want to know about that buzzard ranch yuh aim to start!"

Morgan tensed inwardly. So Hogan had a "boss?" That probably meant he was in with the crew trying to find Devil Dan's loot. And, if so, it meant that Morgan was in a jackpot.

Morgan started walking, with Hogan close behind him, the gun muzzle almost touching his spine. They wound their way through thorny thickets and jumbled boulders until they came to stone cabin in the clearing. The hounds started their howling.

"Get inside, Morgan," Hogan rasped.

Morgan obeyed, staring curiously about the one big room. The room was crudely furnished, dirty, and had a bad smell. On the floor in the center of the room was a huge cougar-skin rug.

"Look, Hogan," Morgan said abruptly, "what's this all about? What've I done to make yuh treat me like this?"

"It's what yuh're mebbe tryin' to do," Hogan growled. "Huntin' buzzard eggs huh?"

"Well, mebbe I did stretch that a little." Morgan grinned. "Real fact is, I was lookin' for the den of six-legged gollywampus which is supposed to have been extinct for a million years, but which I happen to know—"

He broke off, trying to fling himself aside. For, with an angry snarl, Hogan had swung the clubbed rifle. The barrel caught Morgan above the left ear, and he went down, the room exploding in a red burst of shooting stars before his eyes.

As if in a mist-clouded nightmare he was aware that Hogan was tying his hands and feet. Vaguely he realized that Hogan was kicking aside the cougar skin and lifting a trap-door in the floor. Then the burly cat hunter lifted Morgan, with amazing ease, slung him face-down across his shoulders and went down into the shadowy hole that the trap-door revealed.

Morgan's brain was clearing now. He could feel his head swinging from side to side as Hogan shuffled along what appeared to be an underground tunnel. He could see rock walls sliding past, then he became aware that in one hand Hogan

carried a lighted lantern.

Now Morgan was fully awake to his peril. He could see the butt of a holstered six-shooter only inches from his eyes. But it might as well have been miles away. His hands were bound behind him. Momentarily, he was as helpless as a baby.

THIS tunnel along which they were moving, he observed, was a natural one. Its floor was littered with boulders, its walls worn smooth. Obviously it had at some ancient time been the course of an underground stream. While in spots the tunnel floor was level, at others it sloped steeply downward. Twice Hogan clambered down what were evidently "dry" waterfalls.

They emerged from the tunnel into an immense limestone cavern that towered above them like the gleaming walls and dome of a great cathedral. Hogan's footfalls sounded like the bursting of tiny glass bulbs with crystal fragments of sounds clattering away along the tunnel that continued at the far side of the cave.

Hogan dumped his prisoner ungently to the hard floor. Morgan lay on his side, staring up at the burly cat hunter.

"So yuh've come out of it, huh?" Hogan growled. "I was scared I'd busted yore skull, and mebbe the Boss wouldn't of liked that. He may have somethin' special for you."

"Who's the Boss?" Morgan asked.

"You'll find out, if yuh live long enough!"

"Blast it, Hogan, I don't like this!" Morgan spat, pretending indignation. "I'm a law-abidin' gent mindin' my own business—"

"Which is huntin' buzzard eggs, or mebbe a sixfooted gollywampus!" Hogan grinned without mirth. "I don't like smart jiggers, Morgan. Yuh'll stay right here, till I ask the Boss what to do with yuh."

"If yuh'll loosen these ropes—"

"Shut up, blast yuh!"

Hogan lighted another lantern, one of three on a flat-topped boulder nearby.

"So yuh can see the kind of place yuh're in," he told Morgan grinningly. "I won't be gone long."

Hogan turned and shambled back the way they had come.

Morgan drew a deep breath, looking about the huge cavern. Vast white pillars upheld the vaulted roof, and frostlike tapestries, glowing like iridescent fires in the lanternlight, draped portions of the walls, while dangling overhead were giant chandeliers of gleaming stalactites.

Painted on the smooth cavern wall were hideous figures of both humans and animals—some deeply carved into the stone, leering, gargoylish figures posed in grotesque attitudes, some dancing, some kneeling, others obviously engaged in barbarous rites. Some naked, some dressed in strange garb, some half-human and half-animal.

The floor was cluttered with sandstone boulders. Many of these boulders, too, had been carved with amazing cleverness to resemble human and animal figures. The dead eyes of all these boulder figures were turned toward the center of the cave, where Morgan lay, and those eyes seemed to hold anicent evil and hatred.

Morgan shivered, realizing that here was the record kept of its existence by an ancient civilization.

A thought struck Wayne Morgan with jolting force. Could this be Spirit Cave? It seemed not at all improbable. It was not hard to imagine these weirdly painted and carved figures being the ghosts of long-dead men.

This jarred Morgan's mind back to his immediate predicament. Only a moment's effort sufficed to convince him that he was securely trussed. He couldn't break the ropes and he couldn't loosen them.

Hogan had overlooked the small, but razor-keen knife sheathed in his boot. But Morgan quickly found that, with his arms drawn tightly behind him and bound, he was unable to reach the knife.

He bent his lean body backward and drew his feet upward. He writhed, strained and twisted, until he was gasping with exhaustion and sweat streamed over his face. But he coudn't reach the knife.

Finally he gave up in bitter disgust, and looked about the cave for some other means of freeing himself. Apparently there was none. Aside from the lanterns, several blankets lay on the cavern floor nearby, evidence that the cave was used by somebody as a hideout. Tin cans, some empty and others unopened, were scattered over the floor.

Morgan's gaze wandered among the various sized boulders that littered the

cave. The grotesquely carved figures stared back at him, some leering evilly, the mouths of others gaping wide with silent, ghastly laughter.

AN UNPLEASANT place to die, Morgan thought grimly. He chose a boulder and rolled over to it painfully. Near the base of the boulder was a jutting knob of stone which, while not sharp, was jagged. Morgan placed his back to this boulder, groped until he found the knob of rock, placed the ropes that bound his hands against the rough surface and started sawing.

The sandstone, he quickly saw, was rotten. He could feel it crumbling over his arms. It would take a long time to cut through the ropes that way, if he ever could.

He twisted his head to glance up at the boulder. Like many of the others it had been carved into a nightmarish shape. This figure had been shaped to resemble the Devil, with wicked, leering features, a tail, and with twin horns jutting from its elongated head.

Again a jolt went through Morgan. "THE DEVIL HAS HORNS!" Morgan shook his head to clear it. It didn't make sense. But nothing here in this crazy, ghost-inhabited prison made sense!

He was still at it, he didn't know how much later, when he heard the unmistakable sounds of voices and footsteps in the tunnel leading back toward the stone cabin. He rolled away from the devil-shaped boulder, back to the spot where Hogan had left him, bitterly aware that he had made small progress toward severing his bonds.

He could see a flickering glow of lanternlight back in the tunnel, and knew that two men were coming toward the cave. He recognized Cat Hogan's guttural tones. Logically the other man would be the "Boss."

Expectancy lifted inside Morgan.

But the two men didn't enter the cave immediately. They paused just beyond the entrance, and the light was extinguished. In the short silence that followed Morgan could hear their breathing, magnified in the cavern, and he knew that the man with Hogan was studying him as he lay there in the lanternlight.

"That's Morgan, all right," growled the low voice of the Boss. "He's the busky that saved Tom Norbec's life twice last night. I'm glad yuh grabbed him."

"Then yuh figger he lied to me about huntin' buzzards' eggs?" Hogan asked plaintively.

The Boss laughed harshly. "Whatever he was lookin' for, it wasn't buzzard eggs. Mebbe he's just a fiddle-footed cowboy like he claims to be, mebbe not. Anyway, he's seen too much. After yuh've got rid of him, Cat, go have a look-see on the side of the cliff where yuh found this jigger."

"What yuh want me to do with him?"

"Tie a weight to his feet and toss 'im into the river!"

The light flared again just outside the cave. Footsteps echoed and receded. With sharp disappointment Morgan realized that the Boss was leaving without having shown himself.

But there had been something familiar about that low, callous voice. He had heard it before.

Cat Hogan came into the cave. He shuffled up close to Morgan, stood staring down at him with a cruel grin twitching his beefy lips. He drew a long-barreled .45.

"Still here, huh?" he chuckled. "I reckon yuh heard what the Boss said?"

Morgan said nothing.

"Trails's end for you, busky," Hogan went on. "Too bad about them stewed buzzards and the six-legged gollywampus. I'm untyin' yuh now, and we're takin' a little pasear. Don't make a break, though, 'cause I don't want to have to pack yuh where we're goin'."

Hogan drew a skinning knife and cut Morgan's bonds. Morgan sat up, rubbing his stiff wrists and ankles to restore circulation. Hogan had backed away several feet, and watched warily.

MORGAN knew that Hogan meant to kill him. He would have to watch his chance, and gamble. But if he gambled too soon, and lost, he was the same as dead.

"Get up!" Hogan demanded.

"Just as quick as I get some feelin' back," Morgan complained. He stared curiously about. "How come yuh to find this place?"

"Devil Dan found it," Hogan declared. "He was diggin' him a cellar under the

cabin when he tumbled right through into the tunnel. I never heard such cussin' as Devil Dan done!"

A prickling ran along Morgan's spine. "How come you to know about that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" The cat hunter grinned cunningly. "Devil Dan was my friend and many's the time I hid him. Then, after he fell through into the tunnel under the cabin, he had a safe hideout which nobody but him and me knowed about. Days at a time Devil Dan holed up here in this cave, with me bringin' him grub and watchin' for law-dogs." The muddy-eyed giant smiled proudly. "Devil Dan didn't trust nobody else, but he trusted me!"

Morgan knew then: This was Spirit Cave!

With sudden fury, Hogan snarled, "Get up, blast yuh!"

Morgan got slowly to his feet. His powerful muscles were tense as coiled springs as he pretended to stagger slightly to get closer to Hogan.

"Try it, and I'll blow yuh apart!" Hogan warned harshly. "Get on through that tunnel, toward the river!"

CHAPTER X

To Hades—and Back

WAYNE MORGAN had no choice but to obey. The time wasn't yet. He turned and walked toward the black maw of the tunnel at the lower side of the cave, followed closely by Hogan with the lantern in one hand and the gun in the other.

They went into the tunnel. It sloped downward even more steeply now than it had between the cabin and the cave. They hadn't gone far when Morgan saw a grayish splotch of light ahead and heard what sounded like the muted roar of rushing water.

A moment later they emerged from the tunnel, onto a sizable rock ledge at the bottom of Thundergod Canyon. Directly below them, only a few feet below the rock-littered ledge, was the leaping, roaring, frothing river. Here the canyon was no more than forty feet wide, with sheer walls on each side rising up and up until only a tiny sliver of blue sky was visible high above.

"This is it!" Hogan was grinning with sadistic anticipation. He had set the lantern down. In one hand he held the gun and in the other the strips of rope he had been carrying over his arm. "This is as far as we go. Some powerful big fish down there, and I reckon they're tired of a cougar diet!"

"You cat-smellin' sidewinder!" Morgan spat harshly. "So yuh aim to drown me without givin' me a chance!"

"Yuh'll have a chance," Hogan chuckled. "If yuh can stay afloat and swim through this canyon with a fifty-pound rock tied to yore feet! Turn around—I aim to tie yore hands behind yuh ag'in."

Morgan turned slowly. He heard Hogan come toward him. Every muscle, ever nerve was tense and alert. This was his chance, his last chance. Whirl, drive in hard and fast, try to get hold of the killer's gun arm.

Hogan was directly behind him now. He braced himself.

Then, for the second time within hours as Cat Hogan clubbed him with a gunbarrel, the world seemed to explode in a red burst of whirling pinwheels before Wayne Morgan's eyes. The blow had been deliberate and brutal, meant to kill, much harder than the first.

Morgan felt his senses reeling. Then blackness engulfed him. He fell face-forward on the ledge. . . .

Hogan worked swiftly then, making chuckling, brutish noises in his thick throat. One end of a six-foot length of rope he tied about Morgan's ankles. The other end he knotted securely about a jagged, oblong slab of rock weighing at least fifty pounds.

Then, lifting Morgan easily in his hairy arms, the cat man flung him outward into the river, chuckling with ghoulish glee as he watched man and rock vanish beneath the dark, roiling water. . . .

The shock of the icy water against his face jarred Morgan back to partial consciousness. Dimly he was aware of the river's violent, swirling tugging, that he was sinking slowly down into the green depths.

Savagely he fought to throw off the numbing lethargy that held him, and vaguely he realized that Hogan must have

tossed him into the river. He struck out, trying to fight to the surface. But he kept going down, and then, with shocking clarity, he realized that a heavy weight was tied to his feet.

Suddenly his brain was clear, working with clocklike precision. With a thrill of hope he realized that Hogan had not carried out his threat to tie his hands behind him. His hand slid downward, into the boot, came out grasping the small knife.

His lungs were beginning to hurt. The water beat and dragged at him as the heavy rock became anchored on the muddy bottom.

The hand holding the knife shot downward, the keen-edged blade slashed at the rope. At the third slash the rope parted with a jerk. Released, the water turned Morgan over and over, then he fought toward the surface. His head cleft the surface, and he gulped in lungsful of chill, pure air.

The water had swept him past the ledge. On each side the canyon walls rose sheer and gleaming from the water's edge. He flung a glance back at the ledge. Hogan was no longer there. But he couldn't get back to the ledge. The current was too savage.

He was being swept along at breakneck pace as if unseen hands were tugging at him. He didn't try to swim, only tried to keep his head above the surface. The ledge and tunnel mouth vanished. A thunderous roar droned in his ears.

He was, Morgan realized numbly, being driven relentlessly through the black depths of Thundergod Canyon. Only a miracle would take him through alive.

A WHIRLPOOL reached green hands for him, grabbed him, spun him round and round, then spewed him out and along the canyon again. A black, slimy rock, thrusting its jagged teeth up through the water, loomed straight ahead. He twisted desperately, missing the deadly rock by a hair's breadth.

He was jerked under, rolled over and over, shoved, mauled, shaken. He reached the surface, dazed and retching, only to be caught up in a confused roar and jar and whirl that sent him skyrocketing along through a weired gray, mist-filled tunnel.

Oddly, he found himself thinking of that voice he had heard back in the cave. He was certain he had heard it before. But where, and when?

On and on, buffeted, hammered, hurled this way and that. Little light penetrated here, except the greenish glow that seemed to radiate from the wet walls. It was a nightmare world through which he was being driven against his will, a wild, wicked, violent place of thunderous voices snarling at him, and fanglike rocks that tried to rip him to shreds.

It seemed to Morgan that he had been rushing interminably through the twisting, roaring maelstrom. He was weak, sick, his mind reeling. He was numb from the chill water, sore and bruised from slamming into unseen boulders.

And then, miraculously, he was in quiet water, and the warm sunshine was beating down upon him. The wet, steep walls had dropped away to merge with gentle slopes. His feet were on sandy bottom in shallow water.

Morgan dragged himself onto the river bank. He lay there several minutes, too weak and beat to move. He kept trying to place that low, guttural voice he had heard in the cavern, but he couldn't. He put it from his mind for later reference.

He glanced at the sun, and was surprised to see that it was not yet midafternoon. Enough had happened since dawn to fill a couple of days! He had found Devil Dan's skeleton—and he was pretty sure that he had solved the secret of Devil Dan's loot cache. But if so, the secret was his alone, and it would keep a while longer.

Strength flowed swiftly back into Morgan's powerful, resilient body. He got up and flexed his muscles. He was unarmed, hatless, and afoot. He grimaced at the thought of hoofing it back to where he had left the roan on the canyon rim. He knew that the faithful ainmal would still be in the vicinity, but weaponless, he would have to avoid Cat Hogan's place. Later he would have a score to settle with the burly cougar hunter, even though Hogan was only a stooge for somebody else.

Morgan took off his boots and poured water out of them. He put them back on and started walking. . . .

Two hours later Wayne Morgan rode the roan into Tomahawk. He had found the roan about where he had expected. He had circled into Thundergod Canyon, to

his own hideout cave, where he had found an extra hat and the two extra guns he kept in his bedroll. Those twin black guns rode his lean thighs as he entered Tomahawk. He had by-passed the X L for the moment, intending to return later for a report from Blue Hawk.

Sun and wind had dried his clothes by the time he reached Tomahawk. All the way in he had been trying to place the elusive quality in that voice he had heard in Spirit Cave. The voice of the Boss, the man who had ordered him killed, who had had Smoky Ord killed.

He thought he knew whose voice it had been, but he wasn't sure.

He stopped before the Taos Queen. Horses stood hip-shot at racks, among them a big bay which he recognized as belonging to Kirby Stone. As he dismounted, Nick Farrand left the bank and angled across to the Taos Queen.

The banker looked sharply at Morgan, paused.

"Hello, Morgan," he said. "Have you seen Tom Norbec today?"

Morgan shook his head. "Not since last night. Something wrong?"

"No—no, nothing wrong. Just had some business with him. I want to see Jim Roan, too. I suppose he's inside. Drink?"

"That was my idea." Morgan grinned, and followed Farrand between the batwings.

Although the sun was still well up into the sky, the usual crowd was in the Taos Queen. A noisy poker game was in progress at a table between several punchers. Ben Jory was behind the bar helping old Waspy Bill dispense drinks.

BOTH Jim Roan and Kirby Stone stood at the bar, but at different ends, talking with friends, drinks in their hands. Both Stone and the cattle buyer saw Morgan and Farrand as they entered and crossed to the bar.

Wayne Morgan's alert eyes missed nothing.

Farrand ordered drinks. Jory placed glasses and a bottle of Bourbon on the bar. They drank. Roan drifted over to join them. The cattle buyer nodded curtly at Morgan.

"What's new, Nick?"

Farrand shrugged. "I want to see you over in my office in a little while, Jim."

"What about?"

Farrand shrugged again, remained silent.

"Mebbe he's got a lead on Devil Dan's cache," Jory said, smiling cynically. "If yuh have, Nick, it'd only be fair to let us in on it."

Farrand scowled. "You talk too much, Ben!"

"Mebbe!" The saloonman looked at Morgan. "How about you, Morgan? You had any luck?"

"Luck?" Morgan looked blandly innocent. "Shorely you jiggers don't put any stock in that cock-and-bull yarn!"

"Some do and some don't," Roan said meaningly. "Mebbe it's just a ghost story."

"And mebbe that skull Johnny No-Luck had was just a ghost skull." Jory grinned. "Mebbe there never was a Devil Dan Tolliver. What do you think, Nick?"

CHAPTER XI

Trouble at the X L

HERE it was again, that lighthearted banter of the night before. But, as before, Morgan sensed the undercurrent of leashed anger, suspicion and hostility. Between the former cronies there was ill-concealed distrust.

"It's not what I think," the banker said, tight-lipped. "It's what we all know to be true. Devil Dan ran wild in this section of the Territory for five years. He gathered in a lot of loot of different kinds, most of which was never accounted for. It's bound to be cached somewhere in the vicinity." Farrand looked with angry defiance at the faces about him. "Why shouldn't I be interested in locating that cache?"

"Why shouldn't we all?" Jory laughed. "The way I see it, the race is to the swiftest."

"Maybe I see it different," Farrand said flatly. "You didn't lose anything to Devil Dan, Ben. I did. His crew raided my bank twice, and the first time they got away with twenty thousand dollars."

"Which loss was covered by insurance," Jory declared. "You didn't lose anything, Nick. What other reason yuh got?"

Kirby Stone had moved over to join the group.

There was no humor in the big, dark-haired rancher's eyes.

"Aren't you gents forgettin' something?" he drawled. "Seems to me, if that loot is ever found—which I doubt—it will have to be turned back to the folks who lost it."

"A matter of opinion," Jory said.

"This is gettin' us nowhere," Jim Roan interrupted jovially. "Let's all have a drink, then play some poker. How about you, Morgan?"

Before Morgan could answer, Kirby Stone said blunty:

"I told yuh last night I'd play no more poker till this mess is cleared up. I want to know where I stand, and who with!"

The rancher turned and walked out.

"Not right now," Morgan declined. "I'm hungry enough to eat porkypine, quills and all!"

* * * * *

There were five of them—evil-eyed, hard-faced, gun-belted men—led by the blond, slab-bodied man named Gus. They knew the lay of things at the X L. Furthermore, they knew that a Yaqui Indian with a red bandeau girding his head had been guarding the premises since early morning.

They had their plan worked out to perfection. Or rather it had been worked out for them by their leader who was not present.

They left their horses in a thicket back several hundred yards from the X L ranchhouse, and advanced afoot—all except one, who kept to his saddle. Two of them circled through the timber and approached the ranchhouse from the rear. Two others gained the almost dry creek bed that passed within fifty feet of the bunkhouse, and crept unobserved along it until they were at the rear of the bunkhouse.

The fifth outlaw rode boldly up to the ranch buildings and pulled to a halt fifty feet in front of the bunkhouse. He called out, knowing that the Yaqui was inside the squat structure.

Blue Hawk, seeing that the rider was alone, came to the door-way and stood with his Winchester cradled in one arm. Calmly he appraised the lanky, red-haired rider.

"Yes, senor?" he asked softly.

"Lookin' for a jasper named Wayne Morgan," the redhead said.

"Morgan? No man of that name is here."

"That's tough. They told me in town he might be here. Yuh know where I might find him?"

"No, senor."

"I've got a note for this Morgan," Red went on.

"Who is the note from?"

Red scowled. "Inqusitive cuss, ain't yuh, Injun? I was just paid to deliver the note. Yuh reckon Morgan'll be here soon?"

"I don't know, senor." Blue Hawk's face was impassive.

The rider scratched his red-head. "I was told to deliver this note here. Will you give it to Morgan if he shows up?"

"Yes, senor—if he shows up."

"Red" fished in his pocket. "Here it is."

Blue Hawk said. "Throw it to the ground and I will get it."

"Suspicious cuss, ain't yuh?" Red sneered, but he tossed a folded slip of paper to the ground, turned his horse and rode slowly away.

BLUE HAWK stepped to the ground, outside the bunkhouse. Still watching Red warily, he walked forward, stooped and picked up the paper.

"Freeze, Injun!" a voice snarled behind him. "We've got yuh whipsawed three ways!"

Red whirled his horse, a gun leaping into his hand.

No man possessed more reckless courage than the Yaqui. But he read sudden death for himself in that snarling voice if he moved wrong. He froze as motionless as a bronze statue, realizing bitterly that Red had been only a foil to hold his attention while others sneaked up behind him.

"Drop the gun!"

Blue Hawk obeyed, and that snarling voice ordered, "Now turn around."

Again the Yaqui slowly obeyed. Two hard-faced men had stepped from behind the bunkhouse, one at each end. Red had now ridden back and jumped to the ground with drawn gun. The two others came forward, hemming in the Yaqui.

"Simple." One of the gunmen, a buck-

toothed hombre, grinned. "Wonder how Gus and Hachita are makin' out with the gal and old man?"

Red came as silently as a big-footed cat up behind Blue Hawk, and struck with the clubbed gun.

Blue Hawk, sensing what was coming, leaped aside with incredible quickness, snatching at the knife in his sash. The gun-barrel caught him a glancing blow alongside the skull. The Yaqui stumbled, but whirled, slashing upward at Red's stomach with the long-bladed knife.

Red leaped backward with a startled yell, bringing his gun down for a death shot. But the buck-toothed man had leaped in, and his blow was solid. Blue Hawk wilted down to the ground.

Red cursed. "I hope yuh killed the skunk!"

"He's not dead," snapped the buck-toothed man. "Grab hold, Red. We'll tie him up and gag him, and lock him in that tool shed over yonder. He'll stay there till he starves, unless somebody happens across him!"

As they finished barring the door of the tool shed inside which lay the bound, gagged and unconscious Yaqui, Gus and a blocky outlaw named "Hachita" came from the ranchhouse. Between them they held the struggling figure of Tana Slade.

Tana was fighting fiercely, sobbing with anger. She was kicking at her captors' shins, trying to claw their faces, trying to fasten her teeth in their arms. Bloody streaks on one side of Hachita's face showed where the girl's nails had raked him from forehead to chin. The blocky tough was cursing savagely.

"Stop spittin' and clawin', cuss yuh, or I'll bat yuh over the head!" he snarled at the girl.

"Shut up, Hachita," Gus rasped. "What'd yuh expect? Any rough stuff with this filly, the Boss will do it!"

"What do you want?" Tana panted.

"If you think I know anything about Devil Dan's loot, you're crazy! I wouldn't tell you if I—"

"Save that for the Chief," Gus grunted. "And it'll be hard to prove to him yuh don't know anything. Yuh'd be surprised the ways he has of makin' folks remember."

"You fools!" Tana had stopped struggling, but there was bitter scorn in her voice. "There won't be a rat-hole in Arizona deep enough to hold any of you when this becomes known!"

"Let us worry about that." They had come up to the three who had just turned away from the shed, and Gus asked, "Did yuh salt the Injun?"

"As good as salted if he's not." Red grinned. "We locked him in the tool shed. He won't bother us any. I see yuh got the filly. What about the old wolf?"

"He raised such a howl we shoved him into a store-room and locked the door. Crippled like he is, he can't get out. Luke, catch up a hoss for the girl to ride. That pinto there in the corral will do."

The buck-toothed outlaw went into the pole corral, and led out the rangy pinto. The pinto belonged to Blue Hawk, but the girl said nothing about that. Blue Hawk was a friend of the Masked Rider. If the pinto turned up missing, it might set the masked man on her trail. Tana mounted on the pinto and hemmed by the five outlaws who had retrieved their mounts from the thicket, the cavalcade headed to the northwest toward rough, timbered country.

"Take a good look," Gus advised the white-faced girl mockingly as they rode away from the X L. "Mebbe yuh'll see it again, after yuh've told the Boss what he wants to know. But I'd hate to bet my last blue chip on it. . . ."

THE sun was less than an hour above the shadowy hills as Wayne Morgan approached the X L. Its rays struck like shafts of raw gold through the dust haze hanging in the air.

Faint puzzlement touched Morgan's bronzed face as he rode up and stopped before the low ranchhouse. The place was quiet, without sign of human life. Blue Hawk's pinto was not in the corral. A premonition of evil touched the tall rider.

Morgan dismounted at the long tie-rail. He started to step onto the porch, then changed his mind abruptly and strode to the log bunkhouse. The door stood open, but the shack was deserted. Morgan went back outside.

"Hawk!" he called softly.

The deep silence held. With that sense of disaster deepening inside him, Morgan wheeled and strode toward the ranchhouse. He rapped on the door jamb, and

when there was no answer he went through the open doorway and into the big front room where, as the Masked Rider, he had talked with Tana Slade and her father the night before.

He stopped short, his gaze raking the room, and a cold feeling lifted inside him. Nobody was in the room. But it was quite obvious that some kind of struggle had taken place here. A chair was overturned. A lamp lay shattered on the floor where it had been knocked from a table. A flower vase on the old desk had been overturned and the water in it had trickled out over the floor.

But it was Dave Slade's wheel-chair, empty, that riveted Morgan's attention.

He knew then that something was terribly wrong. Undoubtedly Tana Slade was in the ruthless clutches of the killers who were searching for Devil Dan's loot cache. But where was Blue Hawk? And the crippled rancher?

Morgan's brain worked with cold precision. Logically, the outlaws had kidnaped Tana Slade with the intention of wringing from her the secret they thought she possessed. She would be unable to tell them what they wanted to know, because only he, Morgan, knew the secret of Devil Dan's cache. She was in danger of being tortured, perhaps even killed!

"Hawk!" Morgan called loudly, and when there was no answer, he shouted, "Slade—Dave Slade!"

Almost instantly, there was a weak cry, and a tapping sound from somewhere in the house. Morgan went into an adjoining room. The voice called out again:

"In here! In the store-room!"

Morgan leaped to a closed door at the back of this room. He lifted a latch and flung open the door. In the half-light he saw Dave Slade, sitting on the floor with the thick upper portion of his body braced against the wall. The rancher stared up at Morgan with burning, tormented eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Wayne Morgan is the name! I'm a friend of the Masked Rider."

"Morgan!" the crippled man gasped hoarsely. "I know you—Tom Norbec told me how yuh saved his life. I—I thought yuh was one of them hellions come back, when I first heard yuh. They took my girl, Morgan—the dirty-livered sons of perdition!"

"Here, let me help yuh," Morgan said gently. "Then yuh can tell me about it."

CHAPTER XII

Avenger in Black

DAVE SLADE was a heavy man, and a dead weight in Morgan's arms, but the cowboy lifted him without apparent strain, carried him into the front room and placed him in the cushioned wheel-chair. He could hear the man's harsh breathing and knew that the rancher was laboring under a deep emotional strain.

Apparently, however, Slade was unharmed.

Morgan stepped back, cold-eyed.

"Now tell me what happened!" he said sharply.

"There were two of the snakes," Slade declared huskily. "They must have sneaked in the back way, for they were here in this room with guns on Tana and me before we knew they were anywhere about. There was more of them outside, I reckon, for I heard voices, but I didn't see anybody. They told my girl they'd come for her. They grabbed hold of her, and she fought 'em."

Slade broke off, his lips working soundlessly, his deep-set eyes bitter with his helplessness.

"Where was the Yaqui while this was happenin'?" Morgan asked.

"I don't know. He'd been about all day, keepin' watch like the Masked Rider said he would. Mebbe the sidewinders captured him—I don't know. When I saw the hellions manhandlin' my girl, I reckon I went loco. I tried to brain one of them with my crutch. Then I grabbed for my Winchester, but they got that, too. One of 'em hit me. Then he dragged me into that old store-room, tossed me inside and latched the door. He needn't have bothered. Without legs, I was helpless—helpless to help my girl at a time when she needed me most!"

"Grab hold of yoreself," Morgan said sharply. "Yore girl will be helped. Yuh know where they took her?"

"No! One of them said the 'Boss' wanted to see her. I heard the sidewinders drag

her out of the house, and that's all I know."

"How long ago was that?"

"No more'n twenty minutes."

"Then they've not had time to get far. You hang and rattle, Slade. I know where I can find the Masked Rider. I'll tell him what's happened. If anybody can bring yore girl back, the Masked Rider will do it!"

Almost incoherent thanks babbled from Slade's lips, but Morgan didn't wait to hear them. He went back outside. Faint hoof and boot prints in the gravelly earth told him little. The fact that Blue Hawk's pinto was gone, however, convinced him that one of two things had happened. Either Blue Hawk had been captured and taken along as a prisoner by the raiders, or he had taken up their trail alone.

Morgan had no way of knowing that the outlaws had confiscated the pinto for the girl's mount, that Blue Hawk, bound and gagged and just now regaining consciousness, lay in a locked tool shed less than fifty feet from him.

His keen eyes picked out the trail of the single horse that angled toward a belt of timber behind the ranchhouse. He followed the sign, and came to the spot where the kidnapers had left their horses to creep forward on foot. From there the hoofprints of six horses led northward, their sign plain in the spongy earth beneath the pines.

Morgan followed the trail, pushing the tired roan fast. His eyes were narrowed in thought. Six horses. Slade hadn't known how many outlaws there had been in all. Tana Slade was on one of those six animals. If Blue Hawk was on one of the others, he was a prisoner. Morgan's experienced eyes told him that the group was not being trailed by anybody except himself.

The trail left the timber, crossed a low ridge, and angled to the northwest, toward Thundergod Canyon, or the rough country above there. Morgan used the roan to greater speed, for the sun was dropping low over the flame-crested hills.

When he reached the gaping mouth of Thundergod Canyon, he saw that instead of entering the canyon the trail he was following swerved and angled up the timbered ridge that would take them along the east canyon rim. And Morgan knew that the men he was trailing were only a short distance ahead of him now.

He rode without hesitation into the canyon and soon entered the grottolike cave. The roan had been on the move most of the day and was tired. Besides, the job ahead of him might better be accomplished by the black-caped Masked Rider.

WITHIN a matter of seconds he had donned the flowing black cloak and black domino mask, had flung bridle and saddle onto the black stallion, Midnight. He leaped into saddle, and the black, trembling with eagerness, shot out of the cavern as if from a catapult and thundered toward the canyon mouth.

He had lost no more than five minutes by the change.

The Masked Rider spoke softly to Midnight and the great stallion forged ahead, circling the end of the east wall and surging up into the roughs that extended along the canyon rim. The wind had risen and moaned among the gnarled pines and across the rocky ridges.

Ten minutes after leaving the canyon, the Robin Hood rider sighted the small cavalcade he was trailing, moving slowly along the crest of a high rocky ridge that was studded with scraggly timber and boulders. The sides of the ridge were steep, dropping precipitously into thicket-clogged ravines on both sides.

The Masked Rider's lips tightened, his hand dropping to the black-butted .45s. He could plainly make out the slender figure of Tana Slade, mounted on Blue Hawk's pinto, and hemmed by her hard-faced captors.

Blue Hawk was not with the group!

The knowledge brought a gleam of worry to the Masked Rider's eyes. But whatever Blue Hawk's fate, it was too late to aid the Yaqui now. His job here was cut out for him. Five to one were big odds, but no bigger than he had bucked before. He would have to await an opportune moment, then strike.

But suddenly he knew that the choice of time and place for attack had been snatched from him.

Riding along the ravine paralleling the ridge along which the girl and her captors were moving, the Masked Rider saw Tana Slade suddenly fling herself from the pinto and start running like a frightened deer

along the backbone of rock.

The girl's sudden leap from the saddle had caught her captors flat-footed. Their horses reared and pinwheeled confusedly as they were jerked to a halt. The outlaws cursed. Some of them jerked out their guns.

"Put up them hoglegs, yuh dumb apes!" Gus yelled at them furiously. "Catch her before she breaks her fool neck!"

Hachita and Red tumbled from their saddles and leaped after the racing girl.

Tana had darted to one side, with the intention of escaping into the thicket-clogged ravine two hundred yards below. But to her dismay she saw that here a ledge dropped away steeply in a series of crumbly ledges. She swerved sharply and ran along the spiny top of the ridge.

She could hear the pounding steps of her two pursuers, rapidly gaining on her. Sobbing, she tried desperately to increase her speed. But suddenly she stumbled, fell headlong.

Before she could regain her feet, Hachita and Red had pounced on her. They grabbed her arms and jerked her roughly to her feet. The others came racing up.

Tana fought them fiercely, twisting, kicking, clawing.

"Throw her back into the saddle," Gus snarled. "We'll tie her up like the—"

There was a quick, scrambling sound, and a tall, black-clad figure seemed literally to fly up out of the ravine and onto the ridge. In each of the Masked Rider's hands was a black .45.

"Turn her loose, or I'll blow yuh apart like I would a couple of rattlers!" he snapped, in a deep, harsh voice.

But instead of releasing her, Hachita and Red shoved her forward, both of them trying to use her body as a shield, both clawing for their guns.

Not daring to risk a shot under such circumstances, the Masked Rider leaped forward and slashed at Hachita's head with his clubbed gun. The blocky outlaw grunted and went down, pulling the girl with him.

Red blazed a shot at the black-garbed figure, then whirled and sought shelter behind the plunging horses of the other men. By now Gus and the two others had recovered from their first shock of surprise and were grabbing for their guns.

BITTERLY, the Masked Rider saw that he was losing the long gamble he had taken to save the girl. But he made a last desperate attempt. He leaped forward, grabbed Tana's hand and jerked her to her feet, intending to pull her with him to the shelter of a nest of boulders near the rim twenty feet away.

But Gus' horse pinwheeled just then, its rump hitting the girl, tearing her from the masked man's grasp and flinging her headlong to the ground again.

The Masked Rider, coolly measuring his chances, knew that here in the open, with the raiders' guns already levelling on him, he was doomed—and Tana Slade with him.

He wheeled, leaped toward the boulders which clustered on the very rim of the ledge. With lead snarling about him, he flung himself behind the largest boulder. He rolled, rose to his knees, ramming the muzzles of the black guns across the top of the barrel-sized boulder.

[*Turn page*]

But suddenly a portion of the ledge crumbled under him, and he fell backward, rolling down the tiered decline. He rolled for perhaps forty feet, trying desperately to check his descent, before slamming into a shallow crevice that slashed the side of the ravine.

Stunned, he fought to his knees, his guns still clutched in his hands. He could hear the outlaws shouting on the ridge above. He looked upward, straight into Gus' dark, evil face. Gus drove a shot at him.

"Here, you buskies," Gus bawled, "help me! Hurry, cuss it, hurry!"

One of the Masked Rider's guns blazed and roared. But Gus had ducked out of sight. And suddenly a cold feeling touched the Masked Rider. The huge boulder, directly above him, was trembling, moving!

Then abruptly the boulder slid over the rim and plummeted downward, straight toward the Masked Rider, dislodging a torrent of shale and smaller boulders as it hit the first ledge. With a doomlike roar the miniature avalanche slammed down the slope.

Desperately the Masked Rider flung himself to the bottom of the shallow crevice. He felt the earth tremble, heard a bellowing thunderous sound as the huge boulder rocketed over him. Dust fogged into his nostrils, shale showered over him.

And then, suddenly, the world went black. Even as he lost consciousness, even as he realized sickeningly that he had failed in his attempt to rescue the girl, he knew that one of the smaller boulders had caught him a glancing blow alongside the skull.

CHAPTER XIII

The Captive

ON REGAINING his senses the Masked Rider saw that it was after sundown, so he knew that he had been out for perhaps half an hour. He lay on his back, on the ridge, and somebody was pouring water over his face from a canteen. His head ached viciously.

The Masked Rider opened his eyes slowly. The man pouring water over his face was Blue Hawk. In the dusk the Yaqui's black eyes were anxious. Looking over Blue Hawk's shoulder was Tom Norbec.

As the masked Rider opened his eyes, the Yaqui sighed.

"I was afraid, Senor—" he murmured.

The masked man sat up, grimmacing with pain.

"I'm all right, Hawk. How did I get here?"

"We found you, the Senor Norbec and I, in the crevice, unconscious. We were guided here by the shots we heard. Finding the stallion in the ravine, we searched for you."

"What about Tana, Masked Rider?" Norbec asked hoarsely.

"Five men were with her." The black-clad rider rubbed the knot on the side of his head. "Along about here, she tried to escape, and I was forced into tryin' to help her before I was ready. I failed. But we're not licked yet. I have a pretty good idea where they're takin' her. They figgered they'd buried me under that landslide, I reckon." He got to his feet. "What happened to you, Hawk?"

Impassively, but with anger gleaming in his dark eyes, Blue Hawk described the treacherous raid on the X L.

"I was careless, Senor," he admitted remorsefully. "I heard Wayne Morgan call me when he came to the ranch, but was unable to answer or let him know where I was. Afterward, I managed to cut my bonds on an ax blade, knock loose a plank with a sledge-hammer, and get free. It was just about then that the Senor Norbec appeared."

"I was anxious about Tana," the young rancher declared. "I had a feelin' she was in danger, and saddled and rode over. But I was too late to help her. Dave Slade told us what had happened. He said Morgan had promised to take word of it to the Masked Rider. Blue Hawk and me found the kidnapers' trail and followed it."

"Morgan told me." The Masked Rider nodded. "I drew to a bobtailed flush, and lost this first pot. Mebbe we'll take the next, and last one!"

"But them dirty sidewinders have got Tana!" Norbec said raggedly. "No tellin' where they're takin' her—mebbe to that hell-hole up in the hills. No tellin' what might happen to her!"

"Plenty might happen, if we let it," the Masked Rider admitted grimly. "But we're not givin' 'em time to get set."

"Yuh can't trail in the dark."

"I figger we won't need to do any trailin'. Like I said, I have a pretty good idea where the hellions are takin' the girl."

"Then let's hit leather!" Norbec grated. "All I want is to line my sights on them scummy sons."

"It won't be that easy," the Masked Rider cautioned. "We'll prob'ly need help. But first, let's find out whether my hunch is right."

They mounted, and angled down off the high ridge. It was full night, with a silvery moon riding the sky. They made no effort to follow the kidnapers' trail now, for it would be slow, if not impossible work in the moonlight.

The Masked Rider was headed for Cat Hogan's stone cabin.

Ever since leaving the X L he had been riding a hunch that the raiders were headed for the cougar hunter's place with their prisoner—or rather, for the secret tunnel underneath the cabin. It was probable that Hogan still was unaware of Wayne Morgan's escape from Thundergod Canyon, and considered the secret of the Spirit Cave's existence safe.

Nearing Hogan's cabin, the Masked Rider called a halt in dense timber.

"There's a cabin just ahead," he explained. "We'll go forward afoot and have a look-see."

"Cat Hogan's place." Norbec nodded. "Yuh think he's mixed up in this business?"

"I know he is," the masked man said grimly. "Somethin' else I found out from the cowboy, Wayne Morgan."

TERSELY he explained about the hidden tunnel beneath the cabin, how Morgan had been captured by Hogan, taken through the tunnel and tossed into the river, and of Morgan's escape through the canyon. He made no mention of having found Devil Dan's skeleton, nor of the jeweled watch and the message it contained. That would have to wait until later.

"My hunch is that Tana has been taken to the big cave," he finished.

They crept silently through the underbrush to the edge of the small clearing that held the stone cabin. Lamplight glowed inside the hut. In the pole corral behind the cabin were several horses.

Among them was Blue Hawk's pinto.

"My hunch was straight," the Masked Rider murmured.

Tom Norbec drew his gun, and when he spoke his voice was husky with pent-up emotion.

"Then what're we waitin' on? Let's blast the skunks to Hades, before they hurt Tana!"

"Easy, Norbec," the masked man warned softly. "This is what I meant when I said we'd need help. They won't be in the cabin, but in the tunnel underneath. It'll take more than three men to burn them out, and considerable time—by a front attack. Anyhow, I don't think Miss Slade is in much danger, until the Boss gets here."

"The Boss!" Norbec snarled the word. "The snake that had Smoky Ord killed, and now aims to torture Tana! I'll lay odds it is Nick Farrand—or mebbe Ben Jory!"

"It's neither," the Masked Rider said grimly. "The Boss of the raiders is Kirby Stone!"

* * * * *

In the gathering shadows, Gus and his men watched the landslide loosed by the toppled boulder slam with a final thunderous crash into the cedars at the bottom of the ravine.

"That's the last of the Masked Rider." Gus declared gloatingly. "We won't be bothered by that black-cloaked hellion no more."

"I don't see the cuss anywheres," grunted one of the other outlaws.

"He's down there, buried under that mess of rubble. That big boulder went square over him. Well, let's catch up and ride."

Tana Slade, held in the grip of two of the riders, had stopped struggling. All the fight, all hope, seemed to have left her with her failure, and the belief that the Masked Rider had been killed. She knew she wouldn't have another chance at escape.

She made no protest as her captors assisted her roughly into saddle. The cavalcade moved along the spiny ridge

for a short distance, then angled down a decline and climbed another slope. Finally they drew to a halt before Cat Hogan's stone hut.

Tana recognized the place. Interest quickened in her eyes.

Hogan came from the cabin, rifle in hand, a huge bulky shape in the shadows.

"That you, Gus?" he called.

"Yeah. We got company, Cat. Get yore spare room ready."

Hogan shuffled forward and peered up at the girl.

"The Boss tell yuh to bring her here?"

"Yeah," Gus said, "and he'll be along in a little while. Sam, you take care of the broncs. Girl, get off and come with us. Do like yuh're told and we won't hurt yuh."

Tana silently obeyed, dismounting and walking ahead of her captors into the lamplighted cabin. Her eyes widened as Hogan kicked aside the cougar skin and lifted the trap-door, exposing a black hole that seemed to lead downward into the bowels of the earth. A musty smell came up out of the hole.

Hogan led the way down the ladder with a lantern in his hand, followed by Gus. Tana went next, then came the rest of the outlaws. Tana gazed curiously about the rock-walled tunnel, shivering at sight of the huge hairy spiders that scampered over the rocks in the lanternlight.

They went along the tunnel, their footsteps echoing with ghostly hollowness. The rough men kept up a running fire of ribald talk, but nobody said anything to Tana or touched her.

But she was under no illusions concerning the nature of what awaited her. She had been brought here because these hard-faced men—or their unknown leader—thought she knew the secret of Devil Dan's loot cache. They had gone too far now to be squeamish about the methods they used to try to make her talk.

BROUGHT up on the range, Tana had her share of courage, but her knees felt weak as she stumbled along the boulder-strewn floor of the tunnel. She could see no hope of rescue. Her father was helpless. She didn't know what had happened to the tall, stony-faced Yaqui, Blue Hawk, but apparently he had suffered the same fate as had the Masked Rider—death at the hands of the raiders.

They emerged abruptly into the huge cavern. Momentarily, Tana forgot her predicament as she stared about the weird place—at the frostlike tapestries, glowing redly in the lanternlight, the gleaming stalactites, the hideous, gargoylish figures painted on the cave walls, and the grotesquely carved boulders that littered the place. She was startled by the weird sound of their voices tinkling and crashing like glass bulbs being dropped on the rocky floor.

"Nice, friendly place, ain't it?" Gus asked, grinningly. "Here's where yuh'll stay for a little while. We ain't tyin' yuh up, for there's no way for yuh to get out of here. Just make yoreself comfortable till the Chief gets here."

Tana stood a moment, staring about the cave, which was brightly illuminated now by two additional lanterns which had been lit, then sat down on a boulder. Her shoulders sagged dejectedly.

Hachita produced a bottle, drank deeply, and passed it among the men. They paid scant attention to the girl, and by this she was convinced that Gus had told the truth when he said there was no way for her to escape from this subterranean prison.

She suppressed another shudder.

This place was like a scene out of a nightmare. The misshapen figures on the wall seemed to leer and laugh at her with ghastly mirth. The boulder carved figures seemed to stare at her with malevolent hatred in their dead eyes. The laughter of the outlaws crashed and jingled.

Each moment was interminable. To Tana Slade it seemed that ages passed before she heard footsteps and saw lanternlight bobbing in the tunnel that extended back toward the cabin. Suddenly she could feel her heart thudding violently against her ribs.

Here, undoubtedly, was the Boss.

A heavy, range-garbed man, carrying a lantern, strode into the cavern. He paused, glared angrily about the cave.

Tana gave an amazed cry. "Kirby Stone! I—I thought—"

Kirby Stone turned and looked at the girl, his heavy lips drawing downward in a mirthless smile, his eyes hard and mocking. His square face was no longer good-natured and open, but cunning and cruel, as if a mask had been ripped from it to

expose the woolfishness that lay inside the man.

"Who did yuh expect?" he sneered. "Nick Farrand? Or maybe Ben Jory? A lot of folks have that idea, and it suits me fine!"

The girl stared at the Bar X owner wide-eyed, as if unable to believe her senses.

"Everything went off fine as frog hair, Chief." Gus grinned. "We had to muss the old wolf up some, and pistol-whip the Yaqui. Then the Masked Rider tried to horn in on the play, and we salted him. We're settin' purty as a calf in a clover patch!"

Stone whirled savagely on Gus.

"Yuh dumb baboon, why did yuh bring her here?" he snarled.

"But, Chief, yuh told us—"

"That was this morning! Nobody but us knew about this tunnel then. Hogan pulled the first boner when he brought that cowboy Wayne Morgan he'd captured here."

"Shore, we knew about that," Gus admitted. "But Cat claims he tied a weight to Morgan and tossed him into the river. What that saddle tramp saw can't hurt us."

"Like blazes it can't!" The enraged outlaw leader cut viciously at his boots with the quirt in his hand. "Mebbe Cat tossed Morgan into the river, but if he did Morgan didn't stay there. He showed up in Tomahawk two-three hours ago, alive and kickin'!"

"He couldn't have!" Cat Hogan rumbled. "I caved in his head with a gunbarrel, tied a rock to his feet and flang him into the river. Even if he wasn't dead he couldn't've got out of the canyon except through the tunnel, and —"

"He's alive, I tell yuh!" Stone snarled. "Mebbe Morgan's a saddle drifter, like he claimed, but I doubt it. And he knows about this cave!"

THE OUTLAWS shifted and glanced at each other. One of them cursed, a thin edge of panic to his voice.

"Then we've got to get out of here! We're liable to be trapped like scorpions in a bottle!"

"We'll get out, all right, but we've got a job to do first!" Kirby Stone's harsh, menacing voice seemed thunderous in the weird cavern. "This filly knows where Devil Dan's cache is, and she's goin' to talk—and talk quick. Red, you and Hachita grab hold of her!"

Hachita and Red leaped to obey. Tana was momentarily too surprised and stunned to resist. The two killers caught her arms and shoved her roughly back against a boulder.

"I'm not anxious to hurt yuh, Tana." Kirby Stone's voice was suddenly quiet, but as cruel and deadly as a snake's hiss. "But yuh can see we've got no time for foolishness. Where's that cache?"

"I—I don't know," Tana gasped.

"And no time for lying!" Stone snarled. "Yuh've got just ten seconds to talk!"

Tana shook her head. Her eyes were wide with horror.

"I—don't—know!" she whispered.

With a curse of fury the outlaw leader snatched a long-bladed knife from under his coat. He advanced with a stiff-legged shuffle toward the girl.

"Mebbe yuh can remember better with one eye!"

Tana screamed, the terror-stricken sound crashing and tinkling through the underground world.

CHAPTER XIV

Pit of Darkness

UNCOMPREHENDING shock showed on Tom Norbec's blunt features as he stared at the Masked Rider in the shreds of moonlight that sifted through the trees there at the edge of the clearing that cradled Cat Hogan's stone cabin.

"Yuh gone loco, Masked Rider?" he demanded. "Kirby Stone is one of the most respected men on this range!"

"And boss of that crew that killed Smoky Ord, unless I've got my rope bad tangled," countered the masked man grimly.

"What makes yuh think that?"

"To start with, last night in the Taos Queen in Tomahawk, he knew something that only Blue Hawk and me and the killers themselves were supposed to know. Wayne Morgan tells me that after he'd stopped Ben Jory from gunnin' you, and yuh'd left, Kirby Stone said, 'If it hadn't

been for the Masked Rider and his Injun pard Tom Norbec would be layin' on a slab beside Smoky Ord." Yuh didn't mention that the Masked Rider's friend was an Indian, did yuh?"

"No, by grabs, I didn't!" Norbec exclaimed. "I didn't even know it myself then. How did Stone know?"

"That's what Wayne Morgan wondered! Then, when the Boss came to the edge of the cave to have a look-see at Morgan, Morgan knew he'd heard the voice before, but he couldn't place it. Finally, after Morgan had got away through the canyon and gone back to Tomahawk, he saw somethin' that clinched it. Morgan figgered that the Boss, the man who had ordered him killed—and thought him dead—would be in the Taos Queen. When he walked into the Taos Queen, all the men he'd suspected — Jory, Stone, Farrand and Roan—were there. None of 'em showed the slightest surprise, except Kirby Stone. Stone, Morgan says, looked like he'd seen a ghost. And then, when Stone spoke, Morgan recognized the voice he'd heard in the cave."

"The o i l y - t o n g u e d, doublecrossin' skunk!" Norbec swore with bitter, shocked fury. "Likely his gang was behind all the meanness that's happened on this range lately. He had Smoky Ord killed—and now he's got Tana! Yuh said we'd need help to get her out of that snake's den, Masked Rider. Just what did yuh mean?"

"Just what I said!" The man in black spoke crisply. "They've prob'ly got a couple men guardin' the tunnel entrance inside the cabin. We could likely fight our way past 'em, but that would give the alarm to those in the cave, if that's where they're holdin' the girl. Mebbe they'd stand and fight, mebbe they'd try to get away by swimmin' through the canyon. Either way, yuh can be shore they wouldn't leave Tana Slade behind, and alive, to do any talkin'!"

Norbec's face was gray in the shadows.

"I can savvy that. Then what's yore plan?"

"Where can yuh get hold of a bunch of fightin' men the quickest?"

"The Half Moon. I've got a dozen tough hands—"

"*Bueno!* You ride to the Half Moon, round up those gunhands, and get back here as quick as yuh can. Surround the cabin, then hit it hard and quick, and make every bullet count. How long will it take yuh to round up yore boys and get back here?"

"Less than an hour. What about you and Blue Hawk?"

"We'll try to get down into the canyon, to where the tunnel ends on that rock ledge. When them hellions see that they're cornered, I figger they're goin' to turn panicky and try to get out of there any way they can. This end of the tunnel will be blocked, so the river will be their only chance. They wouldn't have much chance that way, but it'd be as good a way as any for 'em to die. Still, unless they killed Tana in the cave, they'd take her with 'em out of pure cussedness."

"So yuh aim to put a stopper in that end of the tunnel, you and Black Hawk bein' the stopper?"

"That's the idea," the Masked Rider admitted quietly.

"But how will yuh get into the canyon?"

"I haven't quite figgered that out yet. . . . Get started, Norbec, and ride like the devil was on yore coat-tails!"

Norbec eased back from the clearing edge and vanished into the dark underbrush.

THE LIGHT had been extinguished inside the cabin.

"But they're still in there, on guard," the masked man whispered. "That stops any chance of us surprisin' 'em. We've got a job to do, Hawk, and not much time to do it."

"Yes, Senor. The Senor Norbec asked a good question."

"About gettin' down to that ledge on the canyon bottom? Ropes — that's the only possible way to do it. And we'll need several of 'em. Those walls are steep, and at least two hundred feet high."

"And the outlaws will furnish the ropes, Senor?"

"That was my idea. Get 'em, Hawk, while I cover yuh."

The Yaqui vanished as silently as a shadow. The raiders had draped their saddles across the top poles of the nearby corral, and on each saddle was a coiled 'lass rope. Blue Hawk was back within five minutes with four or five ropes dangling from his arm.

"Those, with the two on our saddles, should be enough," the Masked Rider whispered. "Let's get started. It'll take a good long while to shinny down that wall, and there may not be any time to lose."

They returned to the thicket where they had left their own mounts, got their ropes, then went silently through the timber and underbrush to the canyon rim. The Yaqui's Winchester was slung from his shoulder.

The canyon yawned blackly before them, only dimly lighted by a thin spray of moonlight. Far below, unseen in the shadows, they could hear the hollow booming of the rushing river.

The Masked Rider studied the canyon rim carefully, remembering the slant of the tunnel from the cabin to the ledge above the river. He couldn't see the ledge in the swirling darkness below, and a miscalculation might prove disastrous to them as well as to Tana Slade.

While he was choosing the spot for the descent, Blue Hawk was busy splicing the ropes together. When the Yaqui had finished, they had a line almost three hundred feet in length which the Masked Rider was certain, was sufficient to reach the ledge.

Having picked his spot, the man in black tied the end of the rope line to the bole of a small pine, letting the remainder slide over the rim into the black chasm. Almost twenty minutes had passed since Tom Norbec's departure.

The Masked Rider took hold of the rope.

"Give me ten minutes before starting down, Hawk," he said quietly. "The rope might not stand both our weights."

"Yes, Senor."

Gripping the rope tightly, the Robin Hood outlaw swung himself over the canyon rim as unconcernedly as if the descent he was starting were no more than ten feet to solid footing, instead of two hundred feet into chaotic darkness where there was no certainty of anything except peril.

Booted feet braced against the granite wall, powerful hands gripping the rope, the Masked Rider started the perilous descent into Thundergod Canyon. The canyon rim, outlined sharply against the moonlit sky, dropped slowly away. Far below, the shadows seemed to swirl as if agitated by strong winds, and the voice of the river was like the moan of a giant in pain.

The descent was slow. A crumbly ledge, a jagged rock edge that might slash through the rope, could be the difference between success and quick, violent death on the fanglike rocks below. Halfway down, he left the slanting moon rays and entered a weird mist-filled world of moving shadows and booming noises. The rope became slippery in his hands.

But the masked man went on down, grimly, determinedly. Now he could see neither the rim above nor the river below. About him seemed to hover a greenish, translucent glow. The voice of the river grew steadily louder, until it seemed to fill the whole world. Then suddenly his feet rested on solid rock.

The Masked Rider had hit the rock ledge almost squarely in the center! Directly before him was the black, gaping mouth of the tunnel.

He crouched a moment after releasing the rope, hands on the butts of his black guns. Although he had considered it unlikely, there was a chance that the outlaws had stationed a guard at the canyon entrance. However, he was alone on the ledge, and the tunnel was quiet and dark.

IN MINUTES more Black Hawk landed on the ledge beside the Masked Rider as lightly as a cat.

"All is well, Senor?"

"So far, Hawk."

"We wait here, until the Half Moon riders attack the cabin?"

The Masked Rider shook his head. "We'd have a better chance inside if a ruckus starts. Besides, the girl might be in danger. Let's get into the tunnel. We don't dare show a light, so we'll have to feel our way."

Twenty feet from the entrance, the tunnel was incredibly black. Spirit Cave, the masked man judged, was no more than two hundred feet from the canyon outlet.

They felt their way slowly forward through the stygian darkness, knowing that a bit of dislodged shale, or the scrape of a boot against a boulder, might betray their presence to the owlhooters whom the Masked Rider was certain were in the big cave. The musty smell of centuries was in their nostrils. The blackness seemed to press in upon them like a

sticky, smothering substance.

Suddenly, as they rounded a bend in the tunnel, a yellow glow of light appeared fifty feet ahead of them. They could hear voices, and see distorted, moving shadows in the lantern light.

"Spirit Cave," the Masked Rider whispered. "They've brought her here, like I figgered. Let's get up close, behind that big boulder in the tunnel just outside the cave, and see what's happenin'."

The two continued to creep forward, cloaked by the shadows, and at last crouched behind the sandstone boulder which half blocked the tunnel just outside the cave. The voices had increased in volume—loud, angry, snarling voices.

One voice — Kirby Stone's voice — snarled: "Mebbe yuh can remember better with one eye!"

The Masked Rider lifted his head and peered over the boulder. Two grinning, evil-eyed men were grasping Tana Slade's arms, had her pressed helplessly back against a boulder. Kirby Stone, a gleaming knife in his hand, his broad face a picture of evil incarnate, was advancing on the girl.

Her horrified scream rang through the subterranean world.

"Time to act, Hawk!" the Masked Rider whispered. "We can't wait for Norbec and his riders!"

Black guns in hand he vaulted over the boulder and into the cave, followed closely by Blue Hawk. His voice, crashing and tinkling through the weird cavern, had the doomlike quality of a tolling bell:

"Another step toward that girl, Stone, and yuh die!"

CHAPTER XV

Ghost-Guarded Gold

KIRBY STONE fell back as if he had bumped into an unseen wall. He whirled, the knife still upraised, uncredulity and shocked surprise making its ugly pattern over his face as he stared at the black-cloaked figure and the lithe Indian.

The four other outlaws in the cave froze motionless, jaws slack with surprise. Hachita and Red were so stunned by the sudden appearance of the men they had thought dead that, when the girl wrenched suddenly from their grasp, they didn't try to hold her.

Tana, sensing what was about to happen, darted around the boulder and vanished behind it.

"So," Stone murmured, his voice suddenly as cold as ice. "Yuh seem to bear a charmed life, Masked Rider. Yuh've caused me a lot of trouble, but yuh won't cause any more."

"Lift yore hands, if yuh want to live!" the Masked Rider warned flatly. "This rat-hole is stopped up at both ends!"

"No go, Masked Rider," Stone sneered. "Neither of yuh will leave here alive!"

A thick-bodied man was standing beside Kirby Stone. With incredible quickness, Stone flung an arm about this man's throat, from behind, and jerked the burly fellow in toward him. The treacherous outlaw leader, with the obvious intention of using one of his own men as a living shield, grabbed with his free hand for his gun.

Their leader's sudden move seemed to break the paralytic bonds that held the remaining outlaws. They snatched at their own weapons. Red leaped sideward away from the boulder, whirling like a huge red tomcat in mid-air, bringing up his gun.

Blue Hawk's rifle roared, and Red spun crazily before slumping to the cave floor.

Stone had jammed his gun between the arm and body of the man he was using as a shield, and blazed two wild shots at the Masked Rider. The masked man weaved aside, fingers trembling on the triggers of his own guns. Stone was almost completely hidden behind the burly owlhoot.

Facing the blocky outlaw in equal battle, the Masked Rider would have shot him without compunction. But it was against his creed to kill a helpless man, even a ruthless killer. He held his fire, running to one side, trying to get a shot at Stone.

The cavern had exploded in a red burst of fury and sound, as Blue Hawk swapped lead with the other owlhooters.

The burly killer, realizing that Stone was trying to sacrifice him to save his own life, suddenly slammed his fist back over his shoulder at Stone's face. Stone cursed furiously, then reeled backward as

the blocky man ripped a knee upward into his stomach.

Weaving, the masked man ran forward.

Stone, reeling, fell face forward on the floor, and from this position thrust his gun upward, blazing and roaring, straight at that rushing black-clad figure.

The Masked Rider leaped aside, feeling the heat from those searing blasts, and himself fell as his boot turned on a small boulder. He rolled, his eyes desperately seeking Stone through the fogging gunsmoke.

Then he saw the bandit leader, rising to his knees, wicked hatred and triumph in his eyes as he brought down his gun deliberately for a death shot. Flame and lead frothed from the muzzles of the Masked Rider's twin guns, the close range bullets driving Stone violently backward to the cave floor.

The fight was over.

Red and Hachita were down, the life blasted from them by Blue Hawk's deadly .30-30. Gus and the fourth outlaw had whirled and escaped from the cave, fleeing back along the tunnel toward the cabin.

But now they, along with the two owlhoots who had been left to guard the cabin, were being prodded back into the cave by Tom Norbec and his tough-faced riders. Tana Slade came from behind the boulder and slid into Norbec's arms.

The Masked Rider had been kneeling beside Kirby Stone, but now he straightened and looked at the new arrivals.

"It's all over, *amigos,*" he said quietly. "Kirby Stone is alive, but I don't think he'll live long enough to feel hemp about his neck!"

KNOWLEDGE of approaching death was in Stone's sullen eyes.

"I've been boss of this owlhoot gang for nearly four years," he admitted hoarsely. "We pulled most of the hold-ups and killin's that've taken place on this range durin' that time. We—I wanted to make a killin' by findin' Devil Dan's loot cache, then—"

"How about Farrand, Jory and Roan?" the Masked Rider asked softly.

"They were as dumb as the rest," Stone rasped scornfully. "All of 'em were after—loot—but they had nothin' to do—with killin's. Roan's not a cattle buyer. He's a detective for an insurance company that lost a lot of money to Devil Dan's gang. He was here lookin' for the cache, and Farrand was workin' with him. Jory would have kept the money for himself if he'd found it. But he didn't, and I don't think anybody—ever—will. Don't believe there is—cache."

"And I believe you're mistaken," the Masked Rider said calmly. "I believe the cache is within forty feet of us, right now!"

The black-garbed man stooped and took a head-sized slab of rock from the floor. Then he turned and went toward a cluster of grotesquely carved boulders at one side of the cave. Ignoring several of the hideous figures, he went directly to the boulder which had been carved into an amazing likeness of Satan, with its leering, evil features, and the elongated head that was topped by a pair of stubby horns.

Suddenly the Masked Rider lifted the piece of granite that was cupped in his hands and brought it crashing down upon the weird figure. He struck powerfully, again and again—and abruptly the figure of the devil burst open and crashed to the cave floor in a shower of fragments!

"'The devil has horns'," quoted the Masked Rider. "There is Devil Dan's loot cache!"

On the floor, amid the stone fragments of the crumbled image, lay what was obviously a fortune—banknotes, gold dust and coins, precious jewels!

"It will be yore job, Norbec, to see that this loot, wherever possible, is returned to its rightful owners," the man in black said sternly. Then his lips quirked. "The owner of eight thousand dollars of it shouldn't be hard to find. In fact she's standing pretty close to yuh, right now!"

Tana blushed, and Norbec's big arm tightened about her.

"Yuh can trust that part of it to me, Masked Rider—and the rest of it, too," Tom Norbec promised. "I'm glad the cursed stuff has been found. Let's have a look-see, Tana!"

They stepped forward, along with the Half Moon cowboys, and stared in wide-eyed amazement and awe down at Devil Dan's ill-gotten loot. Their voices were muted as they spoke.

Kirby Stone had raised himself painfully to one elbow. He stared at the pile of wealth, his lips working almost sound-

lessly, his words so low that only the Masked Rider heard them.

"The fortune I schemed—and killed—to find. And, scores of times, I was within inches of it—without suspecting it . . ."

Kirby Stone dropped suddenly back to the cave floor and lay still.

The Masked Rider glanced at Blue Hawk, standing impassively by. He knew that the disordered brain of Devil Dan, casting about for a safe hiding place for his unneeded loot, had hit upon the cunning idea of secreting it inside a man-made boulder. Using a crude cement of sand, limestone and water, he had fashioned the devil-shaped boulder about the hollow containing his treasure trove with such consummate cleverness that it blended perfectly with the other grotesque figures in the cave.

Without the key to the puzzle—the cryptic words on the paper found inside Devil Dan's watch—not even the Masked Rider would have suspected that the satanic figure was of recent construction. Kirby Stone, in truth, many times had been within inches of the treasure he sought!

"There's a fortune here," Tom Norbec declared finally, turning away from the pile of loot. "Gettin' it back is goin' to make a lot of folks happy. And except for you, Masked Rider, and Blue Hawk, and that cowboy, Wayne Morgan, it mebbe never would have been found. Dave Slade mebbe never would have walked ag'in, and Tana would have kept on refusin' to marry me because she had to take care of him. For one, I'm thankin' yuh here and now—"

NORBEC broke off, an expression of ludicrous surprise overspreading his square features. A moment before the black-garbed Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had been standing near the mouth of the tunnel that extended back toward the cabin. Now they had vanished!

"Call them back!" Tana exclaimed. "I haven't even thanked them for what they did!"

"No need," Tom Norbec said soberly. "The way I see it, the only thanks them two want is seein' other folks happy. That is what they fight and live for—right and justice. Likely we'll never see 'em again. But other folks will, somewhere—folks who need help, like we did!"

For a long moment there was silence in Spirit Cave, silent tribute to the mysterious Masked Rider and his Yaqui saddlemate who, even now, were headed toward some other troubled spot to fight for the oppressed.

When lumbermen and cattlemen are embroiled in a bloody feud, the Masked Rider and his Yaqui pard battle to bring peace and justice to the Western timberlands!

WAR IN GUNSMOKE GAP

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The man rose slowly — and drew his gun quickly

RUST AIN'T FOR SIX-GUNS

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

Walt Vance learns there are times a man must fight!

SURE that he was far enough away now so nobody would recognize him, Walt Vance reined in his bay gelding, looking down on a long, wide, fertile valley. Suddenly, in that green pasture land he saw a thin, rectangular line, made of posts and wire. He cursed.

"This wouldn't be the place we're lookin' for after all," he muttered to the gelding. "Blast a man that'll build fence! We'll go on."

His keen ears caught the rustle in a clump of jackpine, a mourning dove broke out of the pine clump and whirred past the nose of the gelding so close that

the horse shied. Vance's right hand went for his gun. It flashed to an empty holster and he sat there, watching the dove disappear into a thicket.

An embarrassed smile crossed Vance's face.

"Goin' to be hard gettin' used to not packin' my guns," he thought, and from his saddle-bag lifted out a six-gun. "But a man's got to eat."

As he gigged his bay and moved down the slope a jackrabbit broke down the trail, and Vance flashed his six-gun. The jack turned a series of somersaults and stretched out.

Walt Vance got down, slipped his six-gun back into the saddle-bag, built a fire and skinned the rabbit.

He was holding the rabbit over the flame on a stick when the little fire blew up in his face. Embers scattered, and the sound of a shot came from the mesa top.

Vance's blood seethed as he saw a rider moving along the rimrock, put spurs to his horse and head for the trail to the valley.

Vance hunched himself and again held the rabbit on the spit. Then minutes later when the rider came up, Vance was gnawing on the jack.

"It's been some time since anybody used my fire for target practice," he said casually.

The man looking down from his saddle was a blocky hard-faced gent.

"Strangers ain't wanted in this valley," he said.

"I don't figger on stayin'," Vance said, and chewed lustily. "Just slowed for a bite to eat." He gestured toward the surrounding country. "This open range?"

"I don't know as that's any of yore business," the man said. "Yuh're being told to get out, pronto."

Vance looked him over insolently. "You working for somebody that's ashamed to have his business known?" he asked.

The man turned the Winchester on Vance. His finger tightened on the trigger. "I had enough," he said. "Get up or die where yuh hunch."

VANCE got up slowly. He tossed away the last rabbit bone, kicked the fire apart from force of habit, and stamped out the embers.

Mounting his gelding, he grinned. "Nice friendly valley yuh got," he said, and rode down the trail.

"You keep goin'!" the man bellowed. A bullet breathed past his hat brim and a shot cracked as the voice repeated, "Keep goin'!"

As Vance rode along the fence he'd seen from the ridge he saw a weather-beaten sign on which was carved:

BAR X RANCH

"So you're the fence builder," Vance muttered, anger in his voice.

A pretty girl came out of the ranch-house under the mesa and stared at him. Vance reined his horse around angrily. Most likely that girl and her folks would be running sheep on cattle range next. He headed on down the valley. . . .

The town of Aspen was made up of school house, a bank, a hotel, the American House, two saloons—a little one down by the corral called the Nugget, and a larger place up between the bank—and the general store called the Palace, and a few homes.

It was evening when Walt Vance rode into Aspen. Not many people were on the boardwalk on either side of the dusty main street. Loud talk came from inside the Nugget. He reined in before the Palace.

"Looks a little more genteel than the other," he decided. "Mebbe I won't be so likely to get into trouble."

As he dismounted he felt uncomfortable without his guns, but meant to get used to that.

He walked in through the swinging doors and glanced about. The bartender was pushing a bottle across the bar to three men standing at one end. There were only two other men in the bar.

Walt Vance walked to the bar and ordered whisky.

The bartender slid him a bottle and glass. "Been riding far?" he asked.

"Plenty." He poured a drink down at a gulp and trickled another from the bottle. He sipped that one. It was good to feel it go down slow.

He was lipping at his third one when the doors swung wide and two men walked in. One of them was the chunky man Vance had encountered on the trail.

The other, tall and well knit, wore a

brocaded vest, tight pants, and a wide-brimmed black flat top hat. His full beard was neatly trimmed, and a wide bow tie showed from beneath it.

He took in the saloon at a glance, then came walking toward Walt slowly, his hands on his gun stocks.

"Yuh're not foolin' anybody, leaving yore guns in yore saddle-bags, stranger," he said.

Walt Vance turned slowly. "What's that yuh say?"

"I'm Frank Jackson," the bearded man said. "Mean anything to you, gun-fighter?"

"Yuh shore have the advantage of me, Mr. Jackson," Vance said carelessly.

"I've seen that face of yores before!" Jackson growled. "And I can tell a gun-fighting man when I see him."

Walt Vance, trying to figure how this Jackson could have remembered him and still be here, studied the wide-set gray eyes. They were like granite marbles staring at him. Maybe the man was right. Maybe he did know something out of Vance's past.

"I'm just ridin' through, friend," Vance said. "I reckon yuh're thinkin' about the wrong man."

"Don't lie to me!" Jackson growled. "My man saw yuh stop and call out to the Larkin girl at the Bar X. Yuh deny that?"

Vance laughed. "Now yuh mention it, I recollect I did stop. I was readin' the sign some ornery no-good had put up that fence. I got no sympathy with a man that runs up fence."

Out of nowhere came Jackson's big hand. It was a surprise move. The hand smacked as loud as a pistol shot as it crashed Vance's face. Jackson hit with the heel of his hand and let the fingers lash like a whip.

Vance hadn't been ready for that. So far as he knew, he hadn't said anything that warranted it. It staggered him, then the thick-set man came wading in with fists flying like sledge-hammers.

Walt Vance tried to duck. His knees buckled and he caught hold of the bar to pull himself up while he tried to throw up a guard with the other hand. Then the two of them were battering him together, and as Vance tried blindly to fight back on sagging knees, the very air semed to explode and a black fog rushed over him.

"That'll do for now, Ack," he heard someone say.

"That'll learn him," the other man said. . . .

WHEN Vance opened his eyes he was soaked in cold water from the waist up and the bartender was looking down at him. Vance noted the slightly off-center nose and the black hair parted in the middle and slicked down in a curl on either side of his forehead.

A cattleman who had been standing at the bar was lifting Vance.

"If I was you, I'd get out of town fast," the bartender was saying.

Vance leaned unsteadily on the bar, reached for the bottle, poured himself a quick one and tossed it off. He laid money on the bar and turned.

"I see what yuh mean," he said to the bartender. "Only you ain't me. So I think I'll stay."

The bartender plainly thought he was a fool. A young cowboy at the bar grinned as if he liked what Vance had said. The cowman who had helped him up shook his head.

"Yuh'll save yoreself a lot of trouble," he said. "Jackson's got things sewed up tight here. I'd just get on my hoss and ride. News'll get to Larkin that yuh're not stayin'."

"I'd like to get Larkin straight," Vance said. "He's the one that's got a daughter and he runs the Bar X Ranch, that he's got fenced in?"

They all laughed.

"It's the way you put it we're laughing at," the cattleman explained.

Vance passed that up with a nod. "One thing more I'd like to get straight when yuh finish yore laughin'," he said. This Jackson hombre figgers I came by to do some gun-fightin' for Larkin? That right?"

"Yuh're guessin' real close," the bartender said. "Now will yuh get on out of here before there's more trouble? I don't own this place, and I don't want to get into trouble."

"I'm leavin'," Vance said, and added, "Yuh figger this Larkin might be able to use a plain, ordinary ranch hand for a while?"

The cattleman roared. "He shore could," he said. "If yuh're fool enough to take the job he could use yuh. He ain't been able to keep anybody workin' for him."

"Don't tell me," Vance said. "Let me guess. Everybody he gets to work for him, they get beat up of a dark night." He dusted off his hat and clapped it on his head. "Wish me luck, gentlemen. I'm goin' out now, lookin' for work. . . ."

There was a light burning in the window of the Bar X ranchhouse when Walt Vance turned in from the trail. He couldn't see much in the darkness—the black outline of the house, a cleared space between the house and the corral, and a bunkhouse out by the corral.

He tied his bay to the picket fence before the house and stepped through the gate. A voice came from one of the cottonwoods almost beside Vance.

"Yuh don't learn easy," the voice said.

Even in the darkness, Vance could see that the man was that chunky ape that Jackson had called Ack. He was coming toward Vance, his thick arms loose at his sides. "Yuh was told not to come here," he said.

"I'm kind of slow catchin' on about some things," Vance drawled. "Mebbe I'm just plain dumb."

He'd scarcely finished speaking when Ack was on him, fists flailing. Walt Vance was ready this time. He ducked, stepped in, and hit with everything he had.

The blocky man flew backward. There was a whack as his back slammed the tree. He wavered there, sliding down, then he seemed to come round and got on his feet again.

Vance beat him down. A right came slamming up and Ack's head snapped. He collapsed in the ranchhouse yard.

Now Vance realized that there had been spectators. A light, shining from the porch, partly blinded him for a moment. He heard a man's even, kindly voice saying:

"What h a p p e n e d, stranger?" The speaker came down the steps and held the light so he could see Walt's face.

Vance told him. They shined the light on the sprawled figure. The man's eyes were glazed, staring upward, but he moved an arm and grunted.

Vance nudged him with a toe. "Come on, saddle bum. Get up and get out of here. And tell Jackson to come do the job himself next time."

The man shielded his big hand over his eyes to shut out the light. There was sullen fear on his broad, ugly face as he rolled over and started getting up on his hands and knees.

Suddenly Vance saw him move fast. His gun was coming out when Walt Vance dived for him. The gun bellowed. The girl screamed.

Vance was suddenly fighting fury. He leaped, grabbed the hulk and spun in the weird light of the lamp. His antagonist screamed, his body twisted, and went limp.

"My arm!" he cried, "Yuh broke it!"

VANCE lifted the man's guns. He spun the cylinders, took out the cartridges.

"Where's yore hoss?" he demanded.

"Over beyond the cottonwoods in a clump of jackpine," Ack said. "What yuh goin' to do?"

"Put you on him and turn yuh loose," Vance said. "Remember you and Jackson said somethin' about me leavin', to stay healthy? That goes for you, double."

He put Ack on his horse and came back to the man and the girl.

"If yuh don't mind a stranger's curiosity," Vance said, "I'd shore like to know what I rode into."

"You mean you're not the man Dad sent for?" the girl said.

"Wait, Laura," Larkin said. "Till we get inside."

He bowed toward the door and Vance walked in. When the door was closed and they were seated, Larkin said:

"Was my daughter right? Yuh're not the man I'd hope would come in answer to my letter to a friend in—"

Vance was shaking his head. He was studying the girl. She had hazel eyes in which were tiny flashes of orange. She had firm lips and chin. Her hair was soft, dark. The neat brown dress she wore revealed a well rounded figure.

"I'm just ridin' through to find some peaceful place to settle down," Vance said. "But I reckon this ain't the place. I knew that the minute I saw yore fencin'. I like open range myself."

The girl was staring at him, her eyes on fire.

"You think we put it there?" she exploded.

"No indeed," Larkin said. "That's Jackson's work."

"What?" Vance said flatly. "No wonder Jackson socked me when I cussed this fence, if he had it put there. But why?"

"It's a long story," Larkin said. His eyes lowered to the library table. "And I'm afraid there isn't much use of trying to fight Jackson any longer."

"Don't say that, Dad!" Laura said. "We'll fight him and we'll win—somehow!" She focused her unwavering gaze upon Walt Vance. "I know we could win if you'd help us."

"I didn't come here to fight," Walt said quickly. "But I'll listen to the story if you want to tell it. Maybe I could help figure a way out."

"The story is this," Larkin said slowly. "Jackson came here to the valley about ten years ago. He had lots of money and began buyin' ranches. The best in the valley. Those that didn't sell found they had trouble makin' a go. Stock would die or disappear. Jackson gradually got control of the politics in the valley. When he couldn't get what he wanted any other way, folks were beat up. He runs everything now. As it stands, our place here, the Bar X, is the only worthwhile place in the valley he don't own and he wants it the worst way."

"Why?" Vance asked.

"Water," Larkin said.

"He's got water on his places," Laura said quickly. "But we've got the only supply that doesn't dry up during a bad drought."

"Has he offered to buy it?" Vance asked.

"Yes, and offered not a bad price," Larkin said.

"Dad," Laura said, "You know he hasn't offered anywhere near what it's worth to him."

"Not a good price," Larkin said. "But I wouldn't lose. Still, this ranch was homesteaded by my granddad back in Indian fighting days—"

"And yuh're not sellin' because of sentiment, is that it?" Vance asked.

"Partly," Larkin said. Then he leaned forward and his voice rose and suddenly was not that of a tired old man any longer. "I've always had visions of this being home to my offspring. Laura's all I got, but some day she'll meet the right man and settle down and the place will be theirs." His voice abruptly thundered: "And I'll be dog-goned if any man is goin' tell me when I can keep or sell what belongs to me."

"I don't blame yuh," Vance said. "But sometimes a man can be too sentimental. I was for too long. I figgered on duty too long and finally I quit, and now I'm lookin' only for peace and quiet—for a place where I don't ever have to pack a gun or kill a man again." He rose slowly. "I think yuh'd be wise to sell, Mr. Larkin. Yuh can spend the rest of yore life fightin' Jackson and then get licked at the end. Fightin' ain't a pleasant way to spend yore life. I know. I'm takin' things easier from now on. I believe you'd live longer and be happier if yuh did the same." Vance started for the door.

LAURA LARKIN was on her feet, eyes flaming.

"You," she said. "Whatever your name is. You're taking the easy way. How do you think the folks that made the West did it—by letting others come along and kick them out? What made this country great? Taking the easy way and refusing to fight?"

She started for him then, her hands up, as if she were going to slap him.

"Get out! Get out of our house!"

As Walt Vance rode toward town he smiled as he thought about that girl. She made him think of the way he had been ten years and more ago. When everything had been a crusade and there had been right to uphold. Well, he was sick of the whole business now. All he wanted was no trouble and not to have to kill people to make others behave like human beings.

And, riding through the darkness, he thought about what he had gone through in Golden Gap for those ten years and more, as deputy and then as marshal of the toughest gold mine town in the world, men kicking and gouging and knifing and shooting, some times for no more reason than the turn of a card. And he thought of the nights he'd laid awake and seen the horror-stricken faces of the men he'd

been forced to kill with his lightning guns. Those ghastly faces were burned in his memory.

"Not me." Vance muttered. "No more of that. Those Larkin folks would do better to sell out, anyway, and clear out. Some things just ain't worth fighting for, and I don't give a hoot what that girl said about me."

He struck a spot where the grass was cool and green, down the valley, and there he hobbled his bay and rolled up in his blanket with his saddle flap under his head. But he rolled instead of sleeping because he couldn't get a lot of things out of his mind. His past, with the leering faces, and now the girl, Laura Larkin, reminding him of the pioneers who had fought and sweated for what was now the great West.

He said, "The devil with 'em!" and rolled over again, but still nothing came but wakefulness, and a mental image of Laura Larkin standing there about to slap him a blushing red.

As it grew daylight he began to wonder if a man could get peace of mind in some little town. Maybe if he could find the right one—

He crawled out, did up his saddle roll, and slung it across his saddle. He gathered some greasewood, built a fire, and as he cooked some breakfast he thought about what he must do.

"Peace, huh!" he mumbled. "A man's got to sleep, first thing he does, anyway."

So when the sun was climbing, he hit the trail back to the Bar X.

The morning was well along when he opened the gate and rode through toward the ranchhouse. There was no sign of life except the bawl of a cow with a fresh calf in the corral. He went into the bunkhouse and the door swung with the wind.

The house was still. He knocked, then he pounded, and still there was no answer. He walked around the place, trying to figure out what had happened. Then his mind flashed to what Larkin had said. Some folks had even been taken out and beaten or worse to make them do what Frank Jackson had wanted them to. He thought about the girl trying to make him see that sometimes a person had to fight, in order to live with himself.

Vance stood beside his bay gelding, listening. The cow with calf in the corral bawled again. He walked out to see if she was all right. There was water. She and the calf would be all right. Likely she was lonesome.

He came back and listened again. New visions came up before him, of the old man being tortured before the girl. Or the girl being tormented by Jackson.

"I wouldn't put anything past that bearded skunk," Vance thought grimly.

He lifted the flap of his saddle-bag and took out his guns and belts.

"Just this once more," he told himself, "till I get this cleared up. It's a long time now before night and the dark when the faces come to me."

He mounted and gigged the bay and headed for town. And when later he came riding down the main street he felt eyes upon him as he passed the Nugget Saloon. He rode on, heading for one place where there would be time for gossip. He reined before the barber shop and tied. He walked in and nodded to the barber.

The proprietor was a tall, gaunt man, smooth-shaven, with a lush crop of dark brown hair. He got up slowly as Vance came in. Except for these two, the place was empty.

The barber's mouth dropped open and the hand he put out to the single chair shook a little.

"You—want somethin'?" he said.

"A hair-cut," Vance said, "so I can set up and watch folks go by."

"Yes, sir," the barber said. Yuh—yuh want to take off yore guns, mister?"

"I'll keep 'em on," Vance said.

He sat down, and when the barber tossed the gingham apron over him, he raised it so he could get at his guns.

OUT in the street, somebody shouted and the barber jumped.

"Stranger," he said, "I don't like trouble. You the one Jeff Larkin hired?"

"Funny thing," Vance said. "I came in to see if you knew anything about where the Larkins are this morning."

"About 'em?" the barber said.

"I went to the ranch this mornin'. They ain't there. Cleared out. Got any ideas —like somethin' Jackson might have done to 'em?"

The barber shook his head vigorously.

"No, sir. I—I'm a peaceful man. I don't mix with—"

Vance put out his hand to stop the barber. Outside there was a steady thumping sound. Growing louder, it became a rumble.

The barber stepped to the window and looked down the street. He came back, his eyes wild.

"It's Jackson!" he cried. "Jackson and his men. They're comin' down the street —this side."

The old fighting grin came to the face of Walt Vance. He could dream about the men he'd killed at night but this was daytime and he was taking his time at what would come up now.

"Mebbe Jackson's comin' to get a shave," he said, "And his boys want to make shore some stranger don't bother him." Suddenly Vance stopped short and stared at the barber, "Shave!" he exclaimed. "That's what that hombre needs."

He whirled. The thunder of high-heeled boots on the board walk was beginning to sound like a stampede. Vance faced the front of the shop and the apron was off and out of his way. He hitched his guns.

"Stand in the corner," he said to the barber, "so when I tell yuh to, yuh come out and—"

Jackson appeared in the doorway, wearing his guns low. His hands were held slightly wide.

"You still here?" he barked at Vance. "Yuh'll wish yuh had got out whole, while yuh had the chance."

Vance stood feet wide, braced behind the barber chair. He looked past Jackson at the ugly assortment of men who had gathered outside. They were ready to draw.

Vance didn't move. He just talked, and smiled a little. "I was just in the chair for a hair-cut," he said, "But I heard you were comin' and I figgered you bein' an important man—"

"Shut up!" Jackson roared. I'll do the talking."

"You'll talk when I tell yuh to," Vance said and his face was hard, around the frozen smile on his face. "Jackson, it's time yuh had a shave."

Jackson and his men stared, and something kept them motionless.

"If yuh hadn't mentioned that my face was familiar to you," Vance said, "I'd never have thought of how bad yuh need a shave." He kind of chuckled. "Yuh know, Jackson, or whatever yore real name may turn out to be, there's only two reasons for a man to wear a beard. One is to make a man look different when he's tryin' to hide out. The other is to make a man look better. I don't think you look better with a beard. That's why we're going to shave it off, Jackson. You want to come in peaceful and whole, or yuh want to get it cut off for the funeral."

"Why, you—" Jackson started.

"Now you shut that big mouth of yores," Vance said. "Mebbe yuh do recollect me, Jackson. My name is Walt Vance and I was deputy and marshal for over ten years in a town called Golden Gap. That make anything familiar ring in your ornery head?"

Jackson's face paled.

The men outside stood rigid, braced, waiting for a signal from their boss.

"I'd just as soon not kill again," Vance's even voice went on, "but if you insist, I reckon I got to please. Only recollect, I never lost a gun fight yet, else I wouldn't be here now."

The air was still. The barber was breathing as if he'd run a mile.

"You're next, Jackson," Vance said. "Step up and take yore turn. Like I said, yuh're about to get shaved."

Jackson went crazy then. He yelled and reached at the same time. He got one gun out and it flew from his hand and he grabbed his wrist.

Ructions had broken loose and the window crashed and bullets screamed an accompaniment to the cries of men. Two of Jackson's men pitched headlong and fell dead inside the window, their bodies hanging on the jagged glass. Another toppled over and one rose up, made a queer face, and collapsed like a damp sack on the walk outside.

TWO more stood with their mouths open and their hands going into the air.

And Walt Vance stood there and he hadn't seemed to have moved a muscle, except that his twin guns were in his hands now and were smoking.

"I said you're next, Jackson." His voice was low, almost soft.

Jackson was shaking, watching the blood run from his wrist. "I'm bleeding —to death!" he said.

"Shore," Vance said. "What'd yuh think? Where's Larkin and his daughter?"

"I don't know anything about them!" Jackson cried.

The barber was coming over.

"Don't touch him," Vance said. "Let the skunk die."

Jackson's face was chalk-white. "I . . . Don't let me die!"

"About the Larkins," Vance drawled. "Don't reckon yuh can remember where yuh had 'em taken so they'd agree to sell? Mebbe Ack told yuh I was staying. Yuh figgered yuh'd better get busy."

Jackson grimaced. He shook his head. "I tell you I—" He moved to sit down.

"Stand up!" Vance barked.

A blubbery old buzzard with a white mustache and a weak stomach came climbing over the dead on the sidewalk.

"What's going on here?" he was yelling. The badge on his vest glinted.

"Yuh're just in time, Sheriff," Vance said. "Jackson's goin' to do some talkin'. Come in and listen to yore crook boss talk."

"Jackson?" The sheriff had already seen him. "Why, something's wrong here. What'd he do to yuh, Frank?"

"Stop the blood," Jackson pleaded.

"Get away from him," Vance said. "Talk, Jackson. Yuh haven't got much more time."

Jackson slumped. He stared at the spreading pool of blood. He opened his mouth, closed it again and opened it. "All right." His voice was weak. "They're in the old Corcoran ranchhouse up Bullet Creek." The sheriff stared at him. "Go tell Ack and the boys with him I said to turn 'em loose."

"And fast," Vance said.

The sheriff took another quick look at him. "You bet!" he said.

"Get moving," Vance barked. "You're a disgrace to lawmen." He jerked his head to the barber. "Stop Jackson's bleedin'." And when the barber had tightened the tourniquet and the blood had stopped, Vance said, "Now give him a shave. "Close."

He watched while it was done and gave orders to two men outside. While the barber worked, the men carried their dead up behind the sheriff's office.

Vance stood at the back of the shop and watched the beard come off Jackson's face. And he knew the man, then, by the long, white scar horizontal along the left cheek.

"No wonder yuh thought my face was familiar, Driscoll," Vance said. "I was the one who creased yore cheek for yuh. It was long range shootin' and almost dark and you'd just broken out of jail after holdin' up the express shipment of gold and hid the gold before yuh got caught. So that's where the money came from for you to swaller-fork around here. I should have recognized yuh before, only the beard fooled me and I wasn't figgerin' on meeting anybody from that far away over here where I was tryin' to hide out."

"You hidin' out?" Driscoll-Jackson said. "Look Vance, we could make a deal. I'm worth a lot of money now. I could make you a fine deal."

"Yuh already made it," Vance said. "Yuh're goin' to hang or go to jail, one. I'm goin' to try to hang up my guns and stop havin' to kill people. If I don't meet some more varmints like you I'll make it this time, too."

He took Driscoll up to the little single cell jail then, locked him in tight and put the key in his pocket. Then he rode in the direction the sheriff had taken.

The sheriff and Jeff Larkin and his daughter were nearly back to their ranch when Vance met them. Seemed the sheriff had talked a heap after getting them out.

"I'm terribly sorry I misjudged you," Laura said to Vance.

"You didn't misjudge me," Vance said. "Yuh woke me up is about all. I'm mighty grateful to yuh."

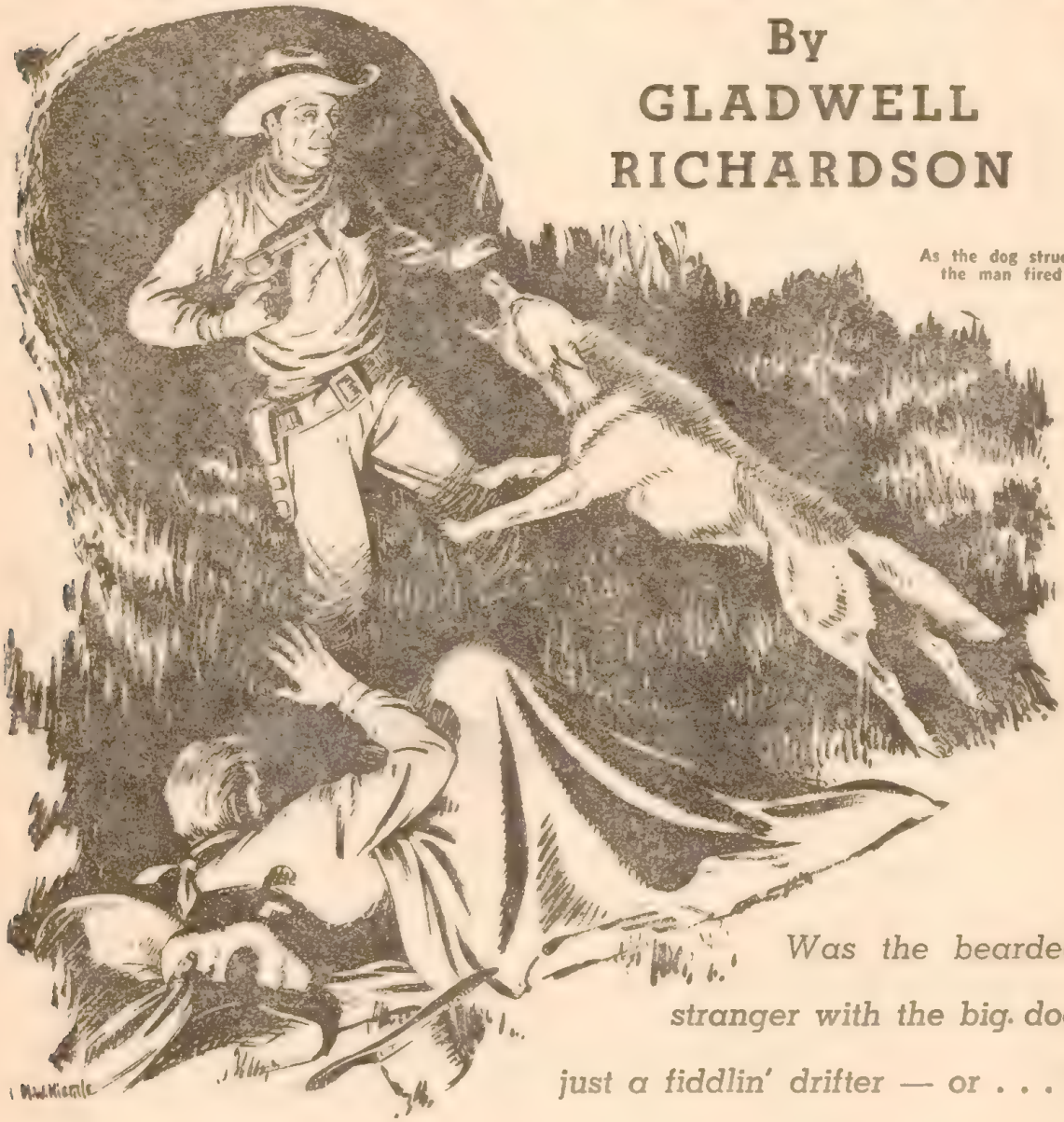
"I know we'll never be able to repay yuh for what yuh've done," Jeff Larkin said.

"Oh, I don't know," Vance said. He grinned. "I'm out of work just now. I could use a job, like say on the Bar X. I'm mighty handy sometimes with cattle and one thing another."

He looked at Laura Larkin. She was smiling at him. Walt Vance could tell everything was going to be real good from now on.

THE FIDDLER

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON



As the dog struck, the man fired

Was the bearded stranger with the big dog just a fiddlin' drifter — or . . . ?

THE bartender scowled when "The Fiddler" entered the Big Ox Saloon. His eyes drifted fast from the wide-shouldered, lanky form in worn overalls to the wolf-gray dog pointing its ears behind the man's legs. They were inseparable, these two. There had been arguments before about the dog entering the saloon.

"Whyn't you fetch in your jackass?" the chunky barman wanted to know derisively. His eyes lifted frostily to the heavy mass of bristling beard covering the face almost to the pale blue eyes.

The Fiddler raised a left hand to the corncob pipe stuck in his mouth through all the whiskers. The action moved the floppy hat on his head, disclosing the swathe of long gray hair that swept back over the left ear.

At first glance folks usually decided The Fiddler was a young man, but that pipe and the gray hair changed their minds. The Fiddler must be just what

he looked, a man past middle age making a living with his stringed instrument as he wandered haphazardly over the great valley of Killwolf creek.

He didn't say anything, merely stared unblinkingly at the bartender, who flushed slowly, then said gruffly, "All right, all right! What'll it be?" and pulled over a bottle.

The owner of the Big Ox approached to stand to one side, his clean-shaven though reddish face studying The Fiddler.

"How's business?" he asked conversationally.

"Not bad," The Fiddler returned quietly. "I play a dance now and then."

"Hmm, could use you for a few days. Piano player gone and the banjo tickler's in jail down at Medford for bein' drunk. Interested?"

The Fiddler hesitated only briefly.

"No, Mr. Kates. Thankee."

The saloon man bristled.

"Seems to me a steady payin' job would be better than pickin' up dimes around the valley!"

"Working for you, I'd have to stay in one place," The Fiddler protested mildly.

"I'm only askin' you to help out a few days," Kates flared with unbridled anger, aroused mostly by The Fiddler's obvious disinterest in the affairs of a man as important as himself. "If I passed the word around maybe you wouldn't have so much fiddlin' business in these parts. You get me?"

IT WAS a threat that didn't appear to worry The Fiddler, who still shook his shaggy, untrimmed mass of hair.

"I like to wander around plumb free, like I am, Mr. Kates."

Kates bent him a sudden, careful look. A curious character, this wandering fiddler who had showed up in the valley some weeks before. So quietly had he come in that he had been around for some time before folks grew much aware of him. Kates shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

A few minutes later The Fiddler quit the saloon, going up the sidewalk with the dog at his heels to the eating counter in a ram-shackle building describing itself as a restaurant. There were only two other customers. The proprietor, both cook and waiter, inclined his head at The Fiddler and put two big pieces of beef on the stove. When they were done The Fiddler gave one to the dog on a piece of clean paper at his feet and turned to eating the other himself.

The two men scoffing loudly and swilling their coffee below him hadn't been saying much. When the proprietor went up front to stare morosely through a dirty window glass at the sun-baked street, they started whispering in bitter comment.

The glint-eyed wearer of a thonged-down holster who sat nearest The Fiddler was, as he knew, Doggy Beals who with his companion, known as Warner, ran the worn out hardscrabble ranch on upper Wolfkill creek. They were men of dubious reputation because invariably a half dozen snaky-eyed gents hung around their place. This caused comment, except that when investigated by the sheriff they were not around to be questioned.

Beals' charged voice rose in its whispering. It didn't carry far, yet The Fiddler heard him.

"Just one answer," he swore feelingly. "They's some kind of undercover officer workin' these parts. Maybe a Cattleman's Protective Association man or even a deputy for old Sheriff Weadick. I'd like to get my gun sights on some such cuss!"

Warner nudged Beals, who went silent. The Fiddler knew both narrow-eyed men turned to examine him anew. In his wanderings The Fiddler had run across this unsociable pair before as well as their hangers-on.

"No good," Beals drawled to his companion as they went back to finishing their food. "It would have to be a galoot got more brains than a stove-up fiddlin' man!"

The massive beard concealed The Fiddler's sarcastic grin. Beals' and Warner's worry grew out of the fact that lately the law had been knocking over rustlers who formerly enjoyed pursuit of their "profession" without hindrance. Overhearing them now no man could escape the definite conclusion that their business, while in the guise of honest ranching, was actually rustling. Except, The Fiddler knew, that such wouldn't be convicting proof in court.

Seeing that the dog had eaten, The

Fiddler got up and strolled out. He never seemed in a hurry. The dog following him close as usual, The Fiddler moved up to the corner where a side street punched west into a ranch road. On the opposite corner stood the hotel. The Fiddler leaned against the supporting post of the grocery store gallery where he stood. The dog promptly dropped onto its belly beside the scuffed-up boots.

Into the north end of the main street rode Sheriff Weadick behind two men roped to saddles. Rustlers. The Fiddler took the dead cob pipe out of his mouth, emptying the dottle. A stir of excitement arose as others saw the sheriff coming in, turning off east to the jail. The two battered prisoners had been among those The Fiddler had seen hanging around the Beals and Warner ranch.

A townsman ventured to the jail before the sheriff got his prisoners dismounted. Then four or five other curious strolled over, and in a few minutes the story was being told everywhere. The two rustlers were overtaken and captured while driving a small bunch of Triple C steers off Rube Conway's range.

A rattle of hooves echoed in the end of the side street. The Fiddler lifted his head to where an oblique view gained him sight of Beals and Warner. Their dark, anger-flushed faces swung as they kneed their mounts around into the west. Having heard the news, they were on their way.

THE Fiddler sighed heavily, glancing at the dog.

"Trouble coming, Batiste," he ventured casually. The dog's head lifted inquiringly. "The sheriff's got some rustlers caught with the goods at last. Beals and Warner quit town on the dead run. Rustler chiefs, and scared maybe this time some of their hands is going to squawk. That pair ain't going to lay down without a fight. Then there's this here undercover man they'll blame for their misfortunes.

"Yeah, the dust will settle and this will be a peaceful range again. Would of liked to stayed sort of permanent. Nice people. Nice country. Reckon it will be moving time for us after playing at Rube Conway's Triple C dance Saturday night." His soft voice trailed into silence.

Batiste pointed his head up the street. The Fiddler tamped new tobacco into the cob pipe from a grimy sack from which the printed paper had been worn. A single rider, a girl attired in tailored whip-cord riding outfit, her black hair confined under a wide-brimmed, gray hat, pulled rein before the sagging roof of the hotel. She greeted acquaintances before the hotel lobby with a light, tinkling laugh in her voice.

The cob pipe went into The Fiddler's mouth. He cupped his hand around the struck match over the bowl. The beautiful Marion Conway was the most sought after marriageable lass in Wolfkill valley. But so far she appeared to be interested in no one man, giving no special interest to any of the cowboys who visited the Triple C of a Sunday.

The dog kept its head pointed in her direction after she dismounted and uttered a low, soft sort of whine. The Fiddler grinned.

"You like her too, eh, Batiste?" he drawled half to himself. When the dog liked someone, that, in The Fiddler's mind, meant complete and unswerving approval. Leave it to a dog like Batiste to know the best of the crop.

The girl, having observed The Fiddler, came over from the hotel porch.

"Hello, Fiddler," she greeted, bright friendliness on her lovely heart-shaped face. It was genuine, just like everything else about her. She called him Fiddler with the same spirit of open-handed generosity displayed by most folks in this section who considered him a friend. There was actually little else they could call him, he realized, since no one hereabouts knew or seemed to care what his real name was.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." The Fiddler straightened up respectfully, noting that the dog did likewise.

"Did you get father's message to play for the dance we're giving Saturday night?" she inquired. "You'll be there?"

"Yes, ma'am," The Fiddler allowed. "Was aiming to head out that way for sure."

"That's fine. We'll be expecting you. Come on out now, or any time. You're always welcome to pull in and feed at the Triple C." So expanding her invita-

tion, she turned and entered the grocery store.

The Fiddler's breast filled up, and this time he was really tongue-tied and not just beset by his habitual reticence for talking.

"There's a real girl, Batiste," he observed, turning off into the side street. "Yeah, one a man could sure appreciate."

The dog at heel wandered along the narrow street, followed his master in behind the open weed grown lots behind the row of business establishments. In the shade of an old barn wall stood the saddled dun horse. The Fiddler rode, and the raw-boned mule the Big Ox bartender had facetiously called a jackass.

From the pile of equipment against the wall The Fiddler took the pads first, then followed them with the pack saddle which he cinched down. The panniers went up, one holding the fiddle case, the narrowed end slanting up and outward. Odds and ends went in between the panniers, mostly camp gear. He covered the top with wool blankets, then spread a tarp, hitching the load secure with a hybrid-diamond hitch one man could sling. Hollowing out the top of the load between the ropes, The Fiddler whistled at the dog, which did not move from a position on the debris strewn ground.

"Okay, Batiste, you don't want to ride."

Taking loose the halter rope, The Fiddler tied it on the near pack. Freeing the dun, pausing to refasten the cinches, The Fiddler mounted. Coming off the vacant lot, he headed towards the sun over the ranch road, traveling at a leisurely walk until arriving at the ford over Wolfkill creek. This was Thursday. The Fiddler figured on circling north, coming down to the Triple C sometime late Saturday. So he wandered up the left side of the running stream, loafing along for the next several miles.

ONCE a jackrabbit appeared on the sun side of a boulder. The Fiddler halted. A six-gun, which few people realized he carried, slipped into his hand from under the blue denim jacket. It erupted and the jack fell over, shot through the head.

"Fetch him in, Batiste!"

He filled the empty cylinder with another cartridge when the dog brought the big jack over, holding it at the scruff of the neck. Dismounting, The Fiddler skinned and cleaned the carcass, washing it in the edge of the creek. Putting it under a fold of the tarp, he rode on into the waning afternoon to where the bed of a wash cut in from the left against a high bank. Willows created a wind break between the dry bed and the bank.

Here The Fiddler unpacked, fed the dun and the mule, afterwards hobbling them across the wash in a grassy glade. He made camp and cooked the rabbit in a pan. When it was done, he cut off the hind legs for himself, the rest going to the dog together with some cold biscuits.

"I declare if you don't eat more than a man," The Fiddler joked. "But you're worth more than some I know!"

Night descended and in its coolness The Fiddler sat on his tarp-covered bed on the ground, facing to the south while smoking. He heard riders kicking stones along the creek before they came up beyond his dead fire. Five of them in the starlight, grim-faced, hardened men on the prowl. A low word brought the dog in behind The Fiddler's back. Only Beals and Warner approached afoot, looking around suspiciously.

"Could make you some coffee," The Fiddler offered.

"We done et," Beals returned sourly.

The Fiddler pulled on the chewed stem of the cob pipe, paying them no outward particular attention. This crew was taut, jumpy, and plenty mad. He could guess what might be coming.

"Travel around these ranges quite a bit, don't you?" Warner began. "See things here and there?"

The Fiddler leaned his arms on bent-up knees, expelling smoke around the pipe stem.

"I ain't never had no trouble attending to my own business," he said finally. Unnoticeable to them, the fingers of his right hand were close to the opening of the denim jacket.

Warner laughed nastily, an edge to his voice when he spoke. "You'd better continue so, do you want to keep on livin'!"

"Come on," said Beals. They strode back to the horses. The others asked questions. There came some arguing back and forth before they cut over the creek

bottom. Words from Beals drifted faintly on the night breeze. "He's another kinda hermit. Likes his own company best, and he ain't havin' no truck with other folks. I tell you, the spy we want has got to have brains between his ears else he wouldn't be cute enough to bounce around our trails pickin' up information for the sheriff without us catchin' him!"

"Still, they got them two boys in jail," Warner retorted.

When the night swallowed them up The Fiddler sat on his bedding, smoking and thinking a while longer. In the morning when he arose, he was in no hurry to break camp. When the sun warmed up the creek water again, an onlooker might have been startled at the youthfulness of The Fiddler's body when he stripped and bathed in it.

It was afternoon when he rode out, due west to a point north of the Triple C, where he dry camped in a grove of juniper. Here headed grass was knee high to the big fat steers grazing in it. When Saturday morning dawned he wandered southward, arriving in the afternoon at a recently dug tank in a wash. Back from it in a stand of cottonwoods, he pitched off temporary camp. Later he cooked a meal of bacon, bread, coffee, and canned tomatoes.

From the middle of the afternoon on, riders were visible in many directions headed for the Triple C a mile below. Wagons and buckboards appeared later. The whole countryside was turning out for the dance at the Conways'. There would, he knew, be a big feed at sunset. But they wouldn't require him until after seven o'clock.

IT WAS still in the glow of dusk when he repacked and rode at a walk for the ranch. There was noise and lights all over the extensive premises. The Fiddler selected an old, long unused corral on the west side. There against a delapidated gate-swing he unpacked, and tied his stock. Sounds from the big house told of supper just ending in a spirit of conviviality.

Taking his time, he got out a change of clothing from one pannier. Doffing overalls, shirt, and jacket, he attired himself in a white, though rumpled shirt, putting on a string tie by feel. Broadcloth trousers followed next, and finally a long-tailed coat having two buttons at the head of the split. Picking up the violin case, he prepared to go.

"Keep camp, Batiste," he told the dog. Promptly the understanding animal turned around twice before sitting down against the tarp roll.

The Fiddler walked bareheaded to the lean-to porch where the crew washed up before meals, slicking his hair with water and even going so far as to smooth the mass of unruly whiskers. He entered the big kitchen to meet the toothy grin of the Chinese cook. Marion and Rube Conway were in the dining room beyond.

"Why didn't you come earlier?" Marion demanded, coming to his side. "We expected you for supper. You sure missed a big feed!"

"Shucks, The Fiddler didn't want to get tangled up with all them people," the genial rancher put in. "Can't say as I blame him for seekin' quiet places."

"Well, he should eat," Marion insisted. "Come with me and I'll dish you out the biggest plate of grub you ever saw."

Under her guiding hand on his arm, The Fiddler returned to the kitchen. Conway clomped in after them, his rounded torso shaking with amusement.

"Marion, he's likely already foddered. I know what he needs to get rambunctious with his fiddlin' tonight!"

"Father!" exclaimed Marion in shocked protest.

Notwithstanding her objection, Conway went to a closet, bent over, and came up with a heavy jug. He filled a water glass and stood back grinning in enjoyment of the situation. The Fiddler downed it, choking afterwards, which caused Conway to chortle anew.

The guests were gathering in the great living room of the house. Furniture had been removed—everything but the piano in the far corner. Outside of the one in the Big Ox saloon, this was the only piano yet brought into the Killwolf valley country. A cowboy French harp player sat in a chair, prominent Adam's apple working up and down to disclose his momentary embarrassment at being one of the "musicians". On the piano bench sat a voluptuous Dutch girl, blue-eyed and tawny of hair, who gave The Fiddler a generous smile of welcome. They had played to-

gether before.

The rugged violin case went against the baseboard. The Fiddler took out his instrument pridefully, carefully. Fooling with the strings a bit, he tightened, rosined, and tested them with the bow. Satisfied, he lifted a large white neckerchief from the case, wadding it around his neck so that its thickest part was under his left ear. He stood a moment in the light, a hairy man with his beard and shaggy locks, his black coat shining rusty green in places, looking every inch the old-time fiddler.

His eyes roved carelessly over the chatting throng. All who lived in the surrounding cattle land must have turned out, including people from Junipine. Mrs. Conway busied herself seeing to the comfort of her guests. Among those from town was Sheriff Weadick, looking decidedly uncomfortable in his Sunday suit. The sheriff's eyes settled on The Fiddler. They drifted away, coming back with an uneasy look in them. He could be worrying that this was a night, with plenty of people gone from home, made for rustling.

The Fiddler shrugged his shoulders. At that moment, the caller, a cowman freshly shaven for the occasion and unduly red from wind and sun, stepped to the center of the floor.

The Fiddler, catching the Dutch girl's eye, inclined his head. The cowboy harp player lifted his instrument to join them with the first strains of Turkey in the Straw. That was always the opener at dances in the valley, just as Good Night, My Lady closed them.

The Fiddler always played standing near the wall. And now, as set after set followed on the floor with no let-up from the musicians, he played as though the Fate of all present depended on it, his half-closed eyes containing a far-away gleam. Time seemed to mean nothing to him. Tirelessly he played on.

AT MIDNIGHT a halt came while sandwiches and punch were handed around. Marion, who had been dancing with a different cowboy partner each set all evening, brought a plate to The Fiddler.

"You play the violin with the sure hand of a master," she told him admiringly. "You've had training. Never did you learn to play so wonderfully by just picking music up like most."

The Fiddler glanced at his scuffed boot toes, his eyes bright blue with pleasure when he raised them to her face again.

"No, ma'am," he admitted. "My mother was a talented musician. She gave me lessons when I was a small boy. Sent me to good teachers. But my paw was clean against such foolishness, as he called it. After she died, when I was sixteen, I went to punching cows."

"Oh, but then you took up the violin again?"

"Yes, ma'am, when I got to be about twenty. One day when it seemed like I couldn't do without fiddling no more, it come in right handy as a business proposition, you might say. Forked my horse, took up my fiddle, and ain't been home since."

"Wandering about the west all these years since?" she asked, her breath catching. He knew she was thinking he had spent a lifetime doing nothing but fiddling away the years.

"It about tells my story, ma'am. I'm doing what I always wanted to. Sometimes I think maybe I'm bringing a little sunshine into other folks lives also."

She couldn't speak for some reason, and for a moment after she went away, he wondered if there had been something in his words that had caused it.

Guests who lived farthest away started going home. Those who lived near or had come on horses would remain awhile longer. The music started again, The Fiddler returning to his enraptured role of playing grandly and with considerable flourish. But ranch-country people must get home, so at two o'clock Mrs. Conway signaled for the final number.

The Fiddler had started on Good Night, My Lady when the deputy sheriff plunged into the open front door. He paused only long enough to locate Sheriff Weadick, thrusting through to him. Not failing in a single note, The Fiddler watched them closely. The sheriff's face went tight with strange news. With his deputy he crossed over the floor to Conway, spoke briefly, and then all three came to the end of the room, passing into the door of a bedroom. Just before he did so, however, Sheriff Weadick looked straight at The Fiddler who, without pause to the music,

nodded his head in a vague motion.

The instant the music ended The Fiddler turned to put his violin away, head bent towards the door standing ajar.

"How the dickens did it happen?" he heard the sheriff exclaim.

"Easy," the deputy replied. "Them five men come in masked, guns in their hands, and threw down on us before we had any idea what was up. In no time they got them two rustler prisoners of ours outside to spare horses they brung, and was gone!"

The sheriff and Conway made quick plans to get riders out in pursuit.

"It was Beals and Warner without doubt," the sheriff declared. "I'd wanted somethin' better on them, but now we got to move on their ranch anyhow."

The Fiddler, not wanting to hang around, departed unhurriedly through the back of the house. The release of the news created considerable stir. He had changed to his old clothes and started packing when men rushed to get horses saddled at the main corral.

He stood idly by while they did so and took off in the night. Then he finished packing. The dog would ride this time. The Fiddler went north, beyond the new watering tank to the copse of cottonwoods.

"Ain't no use worrying about what's happened," he said to the dog. "But it's coming now for sure."

In a matter of minutes his meager camp gear was pitched and the stock hobbled out. He built a small fire to boil coffee. Afterwards he lay down and went to sleep for awhile. The dog awoke him with a short bark of warning which ended in a leap at a man bending over The Fiddler. As the dog struck, the man cursed and fired. The dog fell aside, yelped once, and dashed into the brush.

THE Fiddler never had a chance to resist. They were on him even before the shot blazed. He did get a hand on his gun, freeing it quick enough during the confusion to send it sliding into the leaves in the brush. They threw him over by sheer weight, pummeled him unmercifully, and tied his wrists with a pigging string.

"Guess that'll take care of you, you blasted spy!" came from Warner, who proved to be the man who had shot the dog. The Fiddler kept his mouth closed, his ears attuned to sounds the others apparently did not hear. Though wounded, the dog was crawling back to be near him. In their hurry they had tied the pigging string loosely, and The Fiddler was doing some fast thinking.

There were five of them, when the horses were brought up into the timber. That indicated that the two they had released from jail were on their way elsewhere. The three younger men showed their restlessness by asking why they didn't finish the job here and head for other parts themselves. Beals and Warner, older and more experienced rustlers, scoffed at them. They would take their time, for who would think to look for them here? They would eat, pull The Fiddler up on a rope to a limb, and let him die slowly by strangulation.

"Which reminds me," Beals said, and turning to The Fiddler, searched him thoroughly. "No sign of a badge and no papers," he announced. "I still think he's the wrong man!"

"Horse collar!" said Warner, sneering. "Who else could it be?"

They searched his entire outfit, but brought no evidence that he was a lawman to light. The Fiddler was stood on his feet, and they couldn't see his bound hands working behind his back in the dark.

Warner called for a rope. But Beals cursed him to a stop. He said they were making themselves future trouble uselessly.

In objection Warner broke out in obscene protests. One of the others hissed, "Listen!"

Riders, a big bunch of them, were passing down the other side of the wash in the first streaks of day. All the rustlers faced about for a glimpse of them. The Fiddler squirmed, brought his wrists up over his head, twisting his arms to do so. Thus able to see what he was doing, he pulled his hands free.

No time to leap at them with even a bare chance of success. None to try hunting his gun. He wheeled, stepped fast, and dived into the brush, plunging on through aways.

Behind he heard Beals warning them

all to be silent. The sheriff, Conway, and the cavalcade of Triple C riders passed through the first small break in the timber line to be silhouetted momentarily.

"Not a blasted one at home on their ranch ought to be convincing enough," came the sheriff's voice. "But it ain't."

"It's bound to be them," Conway insisted.

"Sure, but like I told you," the sheriff replied, "we ain't yet got enough evidence to arrest that pair of orejana warts!"

Warner choked something, and in a twinkling seized a rifle from a scabbard on the nearest horse. He swung over on his heels, crouching forward, rifle pointing towards the last opening through which he would be able to get a shot at the riders. Before they reached that point, however, Beals was on him, kicking the rifle aside and calling Warner a fool. The bunch rode on, not suspicioning the wanted men were so close.

"Now, why?" Warner wanted to know, as he abused Beals roundly.

"Use some sense for once," Beals replied. "There's a better way. You heard the sheriff say he didn't have enough evidence to arrest us. We all head south of Junipine where these three boys quit us. We'll lay low a spell, and then go right back to operatin'!"

"What about this fiddlin' man—the spy?"

"I tell you, he's not such! Ain't he runnin' for tall timber right this minute? He'll come back for his stuff after we leave, and let him, because that will get him out of here all the faster. He's no harm to us anyway."

"I still don't like him!"

"I'm still usin' my head for somethin' besides a rack to hang a hat on. Kill that fiddler and we'll be traced from here. Forget him. Me and you come back into Junipine. If we're questioned by Sheriff Weadick, why we been visitin' friends in Medford, savvy?

"Then what? Why, this cussed spy for the cowman is goin' to come into the open. Next thing you know we're onto him, maybe by only watchin' who visits the sheriff. Then we get him into a fight and blast him down in self-defense!"

"Does sound smart," Warner breathed hopefully. "I'm ready to ramble from here. We can eat some place else. Better food than this fiddler would be carryin'."

CIRCLING west, they headed out in the new day. When they were gone The Fiddler, smouldering, and no longer the easy-going, casual man he had been known as, retrieved his gun and went to the dog that now lay painfully on its side. The Fiddler's compressed lips did not soften even after he examined the wound. The hunk of lead had torn a big hole where it came out of the hairy skin behind the head. It had gone in on the side of the neck close to the shoulder. Carefully and tenderly he cleaned the wound, taking two stitches to close the upper part. Then he salved and bandaged the dog. Not once did it whimper, eyes following every movement The Fiddler made.

He had mistakenly discounted Warner's former suspiciousness, The Fiddler now realized. He had forced them here to investigate and but for the absence of identification, The Fiddler would be a dead man.

When he packed up after eating hurriedly, The Fiddler placed the dog on the mule's load. For a moment his hands touched the feverish muzzle.

"Before this day ends we'll attend to Warner!" he declared aloud.

After the long ride out, The Fiddler for once thought it safe to patronize the livery barn. "Windy River" Jackson, the owner, wanted to make a bed of hay for the dog. Instead, The Fiddler took over a stall, made the dog comfortable on his camp gear, and walked through the front onto main street. The sun hung just overhead.

Before the jail building stood the sheriff's lathered horse, and another wearing the Triple C brand. Likely Conway. His eyes drifting down the street as he slowed, The Fiddler saw the mounts ridden by Beals and Warner tied before the Big Ox. He recognized the signs of an immediate showdown. Yet close as it was, a careful man would still refrain from going directly to the sheriff. As though in answer to his immediate dilemma, when he got up before the hotel, Marion Conway came out and walked directly toward him.

"Ma'am, go tell Sheriff Weadick I'm in,"

he said in a low voice.

The smiled greeting died on her lips as she looked surprised.

"W-what?"

"No time to explain," he went on. "Tell him exactly this. Beals and Warner are in, and to wind up things, we got to force their hand. Make them take action. I'm in a better position to start it than Sheriff Weadick. Tell him to watch the front of the Big Ox and after I enter, he's to mosey down there. You got it, ma'am?"

She said, "Yes," and kept that peculiar expression on her lovable face. When she passed him, The Fiddler moved along the street to the barber shop. He crawled into the empty chair at once.

"Leave me enough hair to look like any other cowboy," he ordered.

"Off with the beard and the long hair?" The barber set to work. "Going to quit immitatin' a squaw man, eh?" A few minutes later, when his scissors began to disclose the truth, he quit smiling. Once his fingers touched the scalp over the left ear, feeling the old bullet scar there. "That accounts for the only gray hair you got."

Coming along the street, Marion stared unabashedly through the window before entering. Obviously after delivering the message, she had returned in search of him.

"It's all right," she told him, meaning the business with the sheriff, but she kept looking at his young face. "I don't think I'm going to forgive you readily for misleading me into believing you were an old man," she added tartly.

"Sorry, ma'am," he answered. "Happened to be part of the cover. You see, folks don't usually look twice at an old man fiddler. It was just part of the business, and it's worked so far."

Marion departed without wasting another moment on him. That made him feel at a loss, except the anger and hate in him against the rustler chiefs returned to prevent him from thinking much about it. When he got out of the chair it was to examine in the glass the features he hadn't seen in quite awhile.

"I don't think Miss Conway likes you so well for foolin' her about that hay crop," the barber observed dryly.

A few minutes later, when The Fiddler reached the Big Ox, he went in and swung left, close to the bar. In the group below stood the two men he sought. They gave him hardly a glance. The bartender proved different. First his eyes snapped with surprise at The Fiddler's face, then roved over his clothing and dropped quickly to the floor space at his feet. No dog. The bartender's eyes got larger.

"Ain't I seen you before, friend?" he ventured.

THE cob pipe would just about have finished the bartender. The Fiddler left it in his shirt pocket, turning his back deliberately toward the men down the bar.

A man came up from behind and a heavy hand descended on his shoulder. The voice of Kates, the proprietor, lifted loudly: "Fiddler! You changed your mind about workin' for me to help out?" He couldn't know that he was merely a cog in The Fiddler's scheme.

Instantly silence swept along the bar. Men sprang to get out of the way of the suddenly surprised and infuriated Beals and Warner. The Fiddler turned around.

Kates looked astonished, saying in confusion, "Oh, excuse me, mister," as he slipped far to one side.

Beals and Warner were not in doubt. The clothing, the boots, and hat were the same the whiskered fiddler wore. The whiteness of the young man's skin showed where the beard had been. Both of them knew, too, that Warner's former suspicions had been correct. Yet it was Beals who remembered they were actually not in much danger. He hesitated with his gun thumb down.

"Hold it!" he called. "The law ain't got nothing—" But he was drowned out by the roar of Warner's spitting six-gun.

Warner missed. The Fiddler beat Beals to the draw, and Beals fell, lost his gun, recovered part way only to collapse on the floor wounded seriously. Warner in his over-anxiousness missed with a second wild shot, and a bullet from The Fiddler burned him along the middle so that he shook, went off balance, and as the intelligence of Beal's words finally came to him, let go the gun to throw his hands up in an effort to save his life.

The Fiddler paid no attention to the rush of men into the saloon. His eyes kept steady on Warner.

"I'll give you time to pick it up and start over," he said.

"No, no!" Warner cried, his ashen face trembling. "Sheriff, you got to protect me." His head turned to the left. "I'm your prisoner."

"For why?" the sheriff want to know from where he stood with Conway. "Looks like I can't butt into this—yet."

Warner swallowed painfully. The Fiddler prodded him. "Beals can rest easy for all of me," he said. "But not you, you would-be dog killer!"

"Sheriff, me and Beals ramrodded them rustlers," Warner cried desperately. "We got them two out of jail!"

"You admit your thievin', eh?" Sheriff Weadick drew closer. "We'll go talk it over while Beals is took to the sawbones."

The Fiddler sighed heavily in disappointment. The gun went back inside his waist belt.

"Good work, Andrews," Sheriff Weadick told him. "Your play here puts them away for plenty of time. Give my thanks to the CPA in Denver for the lift."

There came a lot of stares and whispers behind The Fiddler as he went out. From now on this was the sheriff's case. Routine.

The Fiddler went up to the livery barn, paid the goggle-eyed Windy River Jackson some money, and got his outfit together. The wounded dog was bedded in the center of the mule's load. He led his animals outside into the back lot before swinging into the saddle.

Marion rode up at a trot through the dust. She reined close to the mule, leaning over in her saddle to touch the dog's muzzle.

"Father said Warner even told about shooting your dog," she began. "Only he thought he had killed it. I'm sorry."

The Fiddler studied her face. Her eyes were almost black in their intensity as she met his gaze.

"You must feel mighty smart fooling everybody like you did," she went on, "with only Sheriff Weadick knowing you to be a CPA detective."

"I told you, ma'am," he began, but she cut him off, and actually smiled.

"You know what the dog needs? Fresh air and a bed-down in the sunshine."

"Yes, ma'am, I aim to see Batiste get it."

"The man means it," she said to the dog, and turned her head back to The Fiddler. "Seems you should have a name?"

"I'm—I'm Chester Andrews."

"That's better—Chet. You know where there's a better place for Batiste to get well than at the Triple C? I think not. You ride on home with me. Besides, you haven't been paid for playing last night."

He said, "Yes, ma'am. Me and Batiste would appreciate going to the Triple C awhile."

She went on talking as their horses stepped off together. The mule, halter rope up, followed docilely along. The Fiddler did not intrude on her conversation. He liked the deep, sincere sound of her voice.

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BY BARRY CORD

The sheriff walked up to him as he was dismounting

RUSSIAN BILL, BADMAN

The true story of a fabulous self-professed owlhooter who twisted Tombstone by the tail

SOME time during the Earp rule in Tombstone, there appeared out of nowhere a gentleman who called himself "Russian Bill." A self-proclaimed badman, with four notches in the handle of one of his big six-shooters, he swaggered briefly through the mining town's strife-ridden streets, an incongruous figure patently phony when measured against the real article that stalked through Tombstone.

Why he came to Tombstone at this period, no one knew. Who he was, no one bothered to find out. He played his little rôle to the end, and kept his secret even to the vigilante's noose.

What the real hardcases of Tombstone thought of Russian Bill is best exemplified in the following conversation:

Doc Holliday and "Buckskin Frank" Leslie were talking in front of the Oriental saloon when he came by, a handsome figure with cameo features, dark eyes and golden-yellow hair that fell to his shoul-

ders. He was dressed in fancy cowboy regalia, complete from high-crowned white sombrero to fancy-stitched boots, and a huge pair of Mexican spurs clanking at his heels.

"That's Russian Bill," remarked the Doc.

"That so?" said Leslie, probing his teeth with a toothpick.

"A badman," the Doc continued, smiling. "He says so himself."

Leslie turned to look after the swaggering figure. Leslie had seventeen kills to his record and was reckoned one of the best shots in Tombstone.

"He's got nice hair," he admitted, and the Doc grinned again.

What impelled Russian Bill to play the rôle of badman in the toughest town in the West is a mystery.

At heart he was no badman, though he hinted darkly of killing four men and sporting notches on his fancy-handled Colts to prove it.

A Lover of Poetry

He was obviously an educated man, reared in an atmosphere of grace and culture. Try as he would to keep within the uncouth environment of the times, his erudition showed. At odd moments he displayed an amazing familiarity—for a confessed outlaw—with such subject as history, literature and science.

His manners, for a badman, were atrocious. He could never seem to remember to say, "What the devil did you say?" instead of "Pardon me, what was it you said?" when someone asked him a question he hadn't understood.

Within the saloons of Tombstone (no haunts of the intelligentsia) he delivered himself, at times, of verse—orating with theatrical gestures to the gaping-mouthed gentry.

"This is from Shelley . . . This is from Keats," he would tell them. And his beared, tobacco-spitting audience wondered where Shelley had tended bar and for whom Keats had punched cows. But they took Russian Bill's orations good-naturedly, and did not laugh openly at his boasts.

Finally tiring of his strutting and feeling that his act was wearing thin, he decided to show Tombstone's citizens that he was really tough. He joined "Curly Bill's" wild bunch.

Amateur at a Dangerous Business

Curly Bill took a liking to the poetry-quoting "badman," but he was too canny to take Russian Bill along on his buccaneering forays across the Mexican Border. For more than a year Russian Bill was content with remaining at the outlaw hide-out, cooking for the men when they returned from their adventures across the Line, bandaging the wounded, listening to their tales of bravado.

"I want to ride with you," he told Curly Bill one day.

But the outlaw chief shook his head. "Yo're all right, Russian," he said. "But not on a raid. You stick around here an' dream up some more of this Keats' stuff."

This rankled. Essentially an actor, Russian Bill had to give some validity to his act. So he sallied forth and stole a horse.

An amateur at this dangerous business, he was easily apprehended when he rode into the tough mining town of Shakespeare in the Pyramid Mountains of New Mexico.

The sheriff walked up to him as he was dismounting with a flourish at a saloon rail and quietly marched him off to jail. There he might have come to trial and later been released, except for a grim trick of fate.

Death by Hanging

The same day Russian Bill was jailed, "Sandy" King, a real outlaw who had ridden with Curly Bill on many a raid across the Border, got drunk and shot up Shakespeare for the second time in a week.

The first time it had happened, the hard-bitten citizens of the community had shaken their heads, grinned wryly, and passed it off as a bit of maudlin fun. After all, no one had been killed. But the second time incensed them to action.

As Sandy rode down the wide main street, popping riotiously away at saloon windows and scrambling citizens, a clerk in a drygoods store stepped out and coolly shot him out of his saddle. The bullet tore a groove along the base of Sandy's neck and merely stunned him.

The local vigilance committee promptly took him into custody, assembled a court in the dining room of the Pioneer House, and briefly debated his fate.

"Sheriff Tucker just jailed a hoss thief," a whiskered member broke in. "I move we take up his case along with Sandy's."

In this manner, purely incidental, did Russian Bill's career as a badman come to an end. With Sandy King he was brought into the Pioneer House and listened to the unanimous verdict: Hanging!

Two ropes were tossed over the rafters of the Pioneer's dining room. Nooses were adjusted around the necks of the two prisoners. Sandy King asked for a drink and received it. Russian Bill, facing his audience, knew this was his last curtain. His lips moved, murmuring, appropriately enough, lines made famous by the immortal bard the town had been named after:

"All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many—"

The tightening rope cut short the verse, and Russian Bill made his last exit.

A Request From Russia

This should have been the end of it. Russian Bill was buried with Sandy King, and the hard-boiled citizens of Shakespeare went about their daily living.

But a month after the hanging, Mayor Thomas, of Tombstone, received a letter from the United States Consul General at St. Petersburg, Russia, asking information of one Lieutenant William Tattenbaum, formerly of the Imperial White Hussars, who had disappeared from Russia after wounding one of his superior officers in a quarrel. He had last been heard from somewhere in Arizona, it seemed.

The missing officer's mother, the communication continued, was the Countess Telfrin, a lady in waiting at the court of the Czar. She was deeply worried and anxious to get in touch with her son.

Tombstone Keeps the Secret

A photograph was enclosed. Mayor Thomas passed the picture around to the gamblers and bartenders of Tombstone who, without hesitation, identified Lieutenant Tattenbaum of the Imperial White Hussars as Russian Bill.

Tombstone kept its secret. A reply was sent back to St. Petersburg, informing the Consul General that Lieutenant Tattenbaum, long a respected citizen of these parts, had been killed in an untimely accident.

The untruth, although cold comfort to the Countess Telfrin, ended her long search for her scapegrace son and eased her broken heart.

The amazing true story of the fabulous lost Adams' mine of Northern Arizona—a fascinating tale of untold wealth, hidden in the black sands in nuggets the size of acorns!

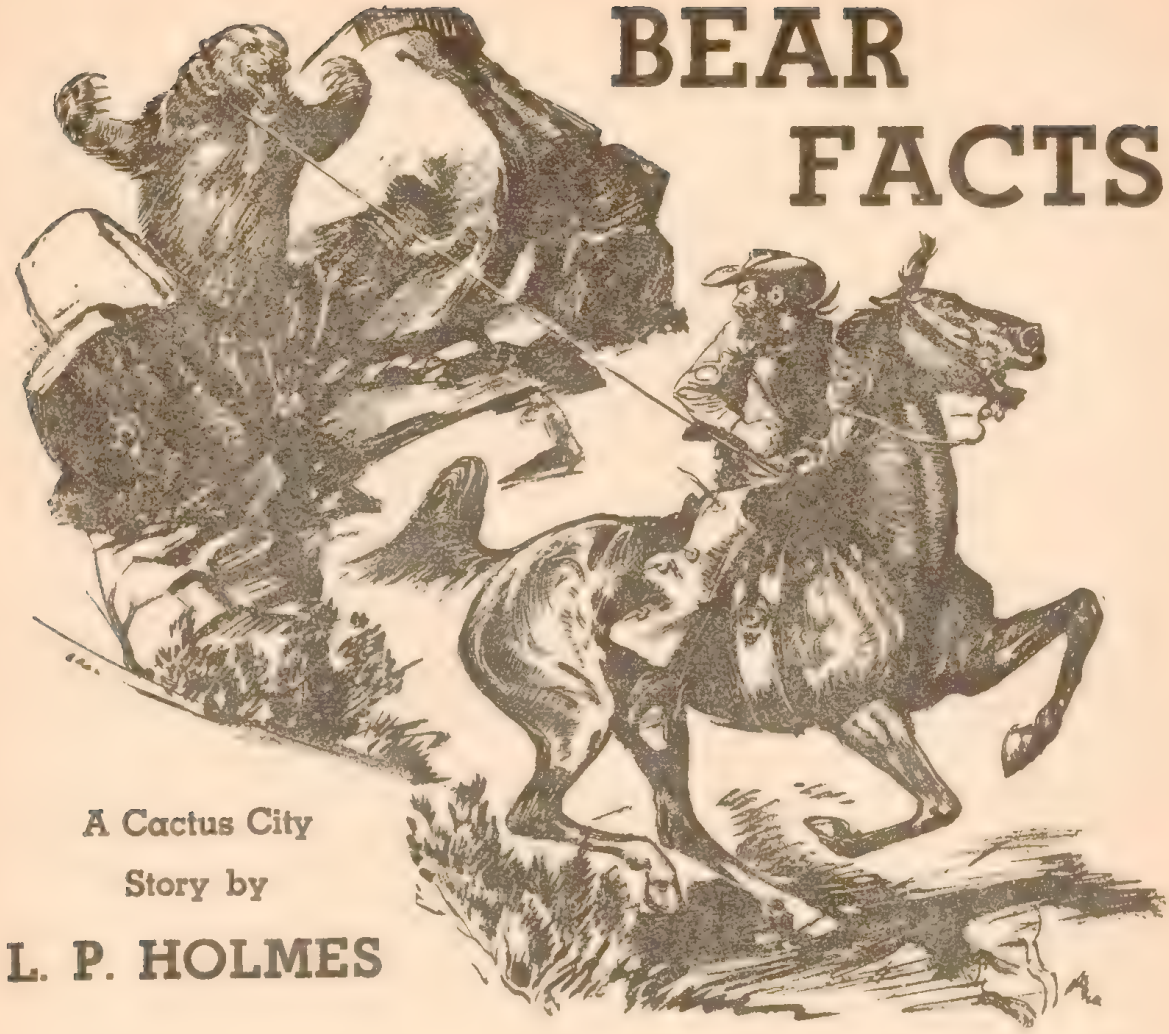
APACHE GOLD

By

JOHN B. WHITING

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

BEAR FACTS



A Cactus City Story by

L. P. HOLMES

Shoo-fly tossed his loop around the bear's neck

MOST generally the cabin which I and Puggy Jimpson and Shoo-fly Davis hole up in at the edge of Cactus City is a domicile of cheer and good-fellership as the poet feller says. There is nearly allus a snort or two of snake juice left in the jug and some bacon and beans on the grub shelf. Bein' simple men of simple needs we is easy satisfied, I and Puggy an' Shoo-fly.

Howsomever, bein' mortal, we still gotta eat an' drink to stay alive and right now we is in danger of dyin' slow and painful, because their ain't no bacon and beans on the grub shelf. On top of which we is broke—stony. So the gloom in that there cabin of ours is thick enough to blind a night-flyin' bat.

Me, Ike Ferris, bein' a practical minded gent, I hists myself up on one elbow off'n my bunk and gives Puggy and Shoo-fly the bad news.

"I've figgered on this thing until my brain's spavined," sez I, "an' I allus come back to the same answers. First, we is broke. Second, we is out of grub an' drinkin' likker. Third, we is in great danger of starvin' to death—unless—"

"Unless—what?" asks Puggy, anxious-like.

It's hard to tell whether Shoo-fly, Puggy and Ike are hunting a bear—or whether the bear is hunting them!

"I know," puts in Shoot-fly. "Unless we rustles ourselves a job an' goes to work."

Puggy lets out a groan. "Knew it'd come to that. It allus does. Work! I'm agin it."

"Who ain't?" snorts Shoo-fly. "Speakin' personal, I'm agin starvin' to death, too. But Ike's right. Facts is facts. We work or we starve."

"I heard tell," sez Puggy, plum hopeful, "that a man can live considerable time on water."

"Mebbe," grunts Shoo-fly. "But I reckon that after a coupla months of takin' on nothin' but water a man'd git purty dang puny. An' he'd still be hungry. Nope, we gotta face the music, Puggy, even if we don't like the tune."

RIGHT about now we hears hoofs come joggin' up to our door and then it's Cat-face Collins who comes jinglin' in, bright and sassy as a jay-bird. Cat-face, he looks around.

"What you three juney-bugs lookin' so mournful about?" he sez. "Somebody steal yore marbles? Why don't you take a snort outa that jug of yores an' cheer up?"

"Ain't no snorts left in the jug, Cat-face," sez Puggy, sad and distant. "Ain't no grub left on the shelf. We is jest tryin' to decide which'd be the toughest chore, starvin' to death or goin' to work."

"Well now," sez Cat-face, kinda let down, "puttin things thataway shore does make it shape up as a tough choice. If'n yuh're goin' to work, why then I reckon yuh ain't interested in goin' with me."

"Where you goin'?" asks Shoo-fly.

"Goin visitin'," sez Cat-face. "I'm rememberin' my social obligations."

Puggy gulps. "Yore what?'

"Social obligations," sez Cat-face, lofty-like. "A man tends to his social obligations or he ain't a gentleman. An' I aims to be a gentleman. If'n you jiggers has forgot this easy, why then you ain't."

"What ain't we?" Shoo-fly wants to know.

"You ain't gentlemen."

Shoo-fly begins crawlin' off'n his bunk. Shoo-fly is allus thataway, ketchin' fire easy when he feels his good name is bein' pushed around.

"I may be plumb ganted down from lack of grub an' drinkin' likker," he snarls, "but that don't mean I ain't man enough yet to bounce a stove lid off'n yore thick skull, Cat-face Collins. You kin start apologizin' right now or I throw a dent into you that's deep an' lastin'."

"Keep yore shirt on," soothes Cat-face. "I was jest leadin up to invitin' you fellers along."

"Along where?" I asks.

"Up in the Piney Hills to see Johnny Longo an' his wife. Remember that lil' honey bee gal we helped Johnny get away from ol' Rattlesnake Rollins when that carnival was here? Didn't Johnny take her an' her tired ol' pappy up to his ranch in the Pineys, and, didn't they invite us jiggers to come up an' see 'em? They shore did! An' here ain't nary one of us been gent enough to visit 'em. Me, I aims to head for the Pineys right here an' now. Are you or ain't you comin' along?"

Shoo-fly, plumb mollified now that Cat-face has explained, gets a far off, dreamy look in his eyes.

"She shore was one sweet lil' honey bee, that gal was," he sez. "Remember how she kissed us an' thanked us so purty, for helpin' her an' Johnny out? If'n I wa'nt so danged hungry, I'd go you, Cat-face."

"Johnny an' the lil' honey-bee shore wouldn't invite us up there an' then let us ride away without a full meal under our belts," sez Cat-face.

Puggy brightens up considerable. "Wonder kin lil' Honey-bee cook good?"

"I bet she kin cook like all git out," enthuses Shoo-fly. "Cat-face, wait'll I slap a hull on my bronc an' I'll be right with yuh."

Puggy scatters off his bunk instanter. "Me too! Comin', Ike?"

"I shore don't aim to be left behind," I declares. "Let's go!"

IF'N WE is hungry before we left, we is twice so when we arrives. A long time before, I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly had stopped by at Johnny Longo's cabin in the Piney Hills.

It was a nice lil' layout then, but gents, you should see it now.

Johnny's plumb enlarged his cabin until its a real sized ranchouse. Everything round it is neat as a pin. There's purty curtains blowin' in the winders, there's a flower garden out in front and a garden patch growin' green and thrifty in the

wet seep down slope from a boxed in spring.

There's a feller hoein' in the garden patch and, when he looks up we see he is lil' Honey-bee's tired ol' pappy. Only he don't look near so old and tired as he did before. Right now he's brown and bright and spry as a cricket. What's more, he recognizes us instanter.

"Ruth!" he hollers. "Come arunnin' an' see who's here!"

Then he scampers over to shake hands with us and invite us down to rest our saddles.

Which we does. And then its lil' Honey-bee herself who comes flyin outa the ranchhouse to give us all a hug an' scold us purty and gentle for not comin' visitin' long since. I'm tellin' yuh, gents, that lil' gal was a picture.

When we took her away from that ol' knife throwin' Rattlesnake Rollins of the carnival, she was a mite wan and peaked lookin', what from bein' bullied around by ol' Rattlesnake an' havin' slathers of knives throwed at her and from worryin' about her ol' pappy.

But now there ain't none of them things to bother her and she's bloomin' like a wild flower. Her eyes is bright and her cheeks is pink and she's so spick an' span in starched gingham she fair crackles.

She insists that we stay to dinner and, bein' real gents, of course we couldn't disappoint her. We asks here where at is Johnny, her husband, and she tells us he's back up in the hills on a ridin' chore, but that he'd be back mebbe by dinner time.

So we lines up in the sun on the ranchhouse porch whilst lil' Honey-bee an' her pappy gets busy. The ol' feller, he scampers down to his garden patch and comes back all loaded down with eatin' vegetables which he takes in to Honey-bee. Then he goes over to that boxed in spring and comes back with a jug, all cold an' drippin'.

"Got it off'n a feller who makes it hisself, way back in the hills," he explains. "Kinda pale in color, mebbe, but it's purty smooth an' it shore takes holt of a man. Have a snort!"

We takes two snorts, good 'uns, all around, and yuh can't imagine how our cares drift away from us.

"Fine a jug of mountain mule as I ever tied into," smacks Shoo-fly. "Shore is smooth across a man's lips, an' really ties yuh together, inside."

So you can see we passes the time pleasant enough. Outa the house about then comes odors of cookin that had us all droolin' like a fox eatin' fish worms and it ain't too long before lil' Honey-bee, she comes and calls us in to grub.

And gents—what grub!

First off there is stacks of venison chops off'n a fat buck Johnny had brought down outa the aspens and them chops is cooked to a turn. There's corn on the cob and tomatters and yaller squash and new spuds, fresh from the garden patch. There is warm, new baked bread and plenty of fresh butter. There is pan gravy and a big jar of homemade mustard pickles. There is all the coffee a man could drink and finally there's a fat wedge of blackberry pie.

Shoo-fly, who's been makin' lil cooin' sounds to hisself and rollin' his eyes like a hound dawg pup that's gettin' its stomach scratched, finally lets out a big sigh.

"I'll tell a man," he sez, "that Johnny Longo is the luckiest hombre who ever drew breath. With cookin' like this to brace hisself up to, I bet he's growed a full foot since we see him last. Lil' Honey-bee, you is a treasure."

WHICH tickled Honey-bee all over and she give Shoo-fly another wedge of that blackberry pie. Which started us all to praisin' her and Johnny and earns us another chunk of pie, too. We ends up so stuffed our eyes bug out and there's lil Honey-bee askin' anxious, has we had enough?

"Honey-bee," growls Cat-face Collins, "I ain't had all I want, but I shore had all I kin eat."

Right about then, here comes Johnny Longo trampin' into the house and he greets us all around plumb happy to see us. But there's a lil' frown of worry about Johnny's eyes and when lil' Honey-bee asks him, gentle and sweet, what's the matter, Johnny tells us about this here bear.

Seems like it is a big ol' bear and a mean one, turned calf and colt killer. On this ride Johnny's jest come in from, he finds two more calves this bear had killed and fed on.

"That cussed critter is gonna git away

with all my year's profit less'n I stretch its hide," declares Johnny. "So, while I'd like nothin' better than to stay an' visit with you fellers, I gotta go an' try run down the ornery son-of-a-gun, soon as I finish eatin'. There's a purty fair amount of sign left around the last calf I found an' I want to start readin' it before it gets too old. But you boys make yoreselves to home. Ruth an' Pappy will take care of you."

"Well, now," sez Shoo-fly, "when I've et a man's good grub an' have been made happy lookin' at his purty wife, I figger I owe that man a deep an' lastin debt. I don't aim to let him go off alone to round up a killer bear. Johnny, there's two of us goin' after that bear."

"Yuh're wrong, Shoo-fly," growls Cat-face Collins. "There's three of us."

"Count again, Cat-face," chirrups Puggy. "There is five of us goin' after that ol' bear's scalp, eh, Ike?"

"Five is right," sez I. "This is a chore we'll be proud to help you at, Johnny."

So that's the way it was. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly and Cat-face Collins, we lines out after Johnny Longo, headin' deep into the Piney Hills, lookin' for bear. I admit that deep down, I'd have liked nothin' better than a chance to find me a chunk of shade and curl up for a snooze, what with bein' chock full of lil' Honey-bee's swell cookin' and her old' pappy's mountain mule.

I coulda put off huntin' bear until the next day or mebbe the next week, for that matter, without my conscience botherin' me none, bein' the kind of hombre who can take his bear huntin' or leave it alone. Particularly when this particular bear is big and mean and has turned killer. But with the rest of the boys goin', why I jest had to tag along.

Well, sir—it's a good five miles back into the Pineys that Johnny Longo takes us before droppin' down into a lil' grass hollow, surrounded by a big, shadowy, kinda gloomy and forbiddin' lookin' timber. Spread out in this hollow is all that's left of what had been once a fat lil' white-face slick ear.

Right away our broncs begin actin' kinda worried and edgy. Puggy sidles his bronc over next to mine.

"Ike, these broncs is smellin' bear, smellin' big, mean an' killer bear," he sez. "Yuh reckon ol' bear is frousterin' around close in some of that dark timber yonder, lookin' us over an' gettin' all set to sink a fang in us, should he get a mite of a chance?"

Sayin' which, Puggy hists up a bit in his saddle an' stares solemn at the timber.

"Couldn't say," sez I. "I shore hope not. Bears is plumb uncertain critters. Yuh never know about a bear."

Johnny Longo, he's climbed outa his saddle and is leadin' his bronc around, starin' at the ground. Shoo-fly Davis an' Cat-face Collins, they've done likewise, and every once in a while the three of 'em would stop, lean down and look the ground over an' talk plumb serious an' important.

PURTY soon it's Shoo-fly who hollers, "Come over here, Ike—Puggy. Want to show you somethin'."

So I an' Puggy ride over an' Shoo-fly says, "Git down an' take a look at what I'd call a purty middlin' fair sized track."

Gentlemen, I didn't have to git no closer'n where I was to see that there bear track. In our time I and Puggy had see'd quite a scatterin' of bear tracks, but anything we'd ever saw before looked like a coon track along side of this 'un. It's right there in the dust of a cattle trail an' gentlemen, it's big!

"You plumb shore, Johnny, that this'n is the bear yuh're lookin' for?" asks Puggy, anxious-like. "Big ol' bear like this'n is generally too fat an lazy to bother live stock. I'd say it was one of them lil' scrawny bears which is allus hungry that's been gettin' yore calves.'

It's Shoo-fly who answers. "How's a bear gonna git big an' fat an' lazy if'n it ain't from scraggin' Johnny's calves? Aint no bear gits bigger'n fatter than one that's veal fed. Course this is the bear we're lookin' for—an' we're gonna git him, too.'

I clears my throat an asks, "How we gonna git him?"

"We are," declares Shoot-fly, "gonna trail him an' run him down an' fix him permanent. We is gonna stretch his hide an' make it into a fine big rug for lil' Honey-bee's parlor floor."

"Mebbe," suggests Puggy, plumb hopeful, "mebbe Honey-bee'd ruther have a coyote hide for a rug. I know where we could get whole slathers of coyote hides."

"Ain't no rug fit for Honey-bee's parlor floor 'ceptin' a bear rug," insists Shoo-fly. "An this 'un is gonna be it. C'mon! Johnny an Cat-face has already started trailin'."

Which was true enough. Johnny Longo an' Cat-face Collins has already struck out along that bear trail like a pair of anxious hound dawgs, ridin' at a jog. For the tracks of that ol' bear is so plumb big and deep even a near sighted gent coulda follered 'em at a high lope.

SHOO-FLY cuts away after Johnny an' Cat-face, plumb eager and interested. I an' Puggy, havin' come this far jest gotta foller along, even though we does it plumb reluctant. I see Puggy is countin' on his fingers and I asks him how come?

"Jest figgerin', Ike," mumbled Puggy. "How much appetite would a bear big as this 'un have, anyhow?"

Which is such a fool, unpleasant question I gets kinda wringy an' answers short-like. "How'n Tophet would I know? I never went to the trouble of measurin' no bear's appetite. There's so many more healthful an' interestin' things to do than gamblin' on a bear's eatin' capacity."

"Well," sez Puggy, "there is three men an three hosses out ahead of us. Don't yuh think that if'n a bear—even a big ol' buster like this 'un—was to git outside of three men an' three broncs he'd figger he'd had hisself a square meal for the time bein'?"

"Shore hope so," I sez. "Jest the same, yuh never can tell about a bear!"

Well sirs, that there bear trail leads back an' back into them there Piney Hills and all the time the timber gets thicker and darker and gloomier lookin'. The country begins to break up into a sorta badlands with steep ridges an' deep canyons an' gulches running' all which ways. It's the kinda country that'd get on a man's nerves even if he knowed for certain there wasn't no bear within a thousand miles.

But we knowed jest the opposite. We knowed that somewhere around in this here spooky country there was a big ol' buster of a bear, plumb mean and slickery and on the prod, a bear most likely capable of swallerin' a man an' half his bronc at one gulp. And if you think them facts didn't do things to mine and Puggy's peace of mind!

YET all these horr'ble possibilities ain't fazin' Shoo-fly Davis one durn bit. Why that danged lil' bee-head is like a kid at Christmas. His eyes is shinin' and he's plump pop headed with excitement. There's a bristle to his mop of hair and whiskers and he rides high and forward in his saddle like he's jest ayearnin' to spit in ol' bear's eye and then settle things with his bare hands.

"Look at him, will yuh, Ike," grumbles Puggy. "Yuh'd think we was on the trail of a jug of the best drinkin' likker this side of the Rocky Mountains instead of pesticatin' around in the back yard of the biggest, meanest bear in North Americy. That cussed lil' hooty-corn ain't got the sense he was borned with."

About then Shoo-fly drops back along side of I an' Puggy, "What you too jiggers lookin' so sad an' mournful about?" he sez. "Here we is reposin' outside the best feed of grub we've been tuckered into since I don't know when. Here we is still glowin' from a coupla snorts each of high class mountain mule. Here we is on the trail of a bear big enough to make history in Cactus County an' here you two jiggers is lookin' like somebody had stole all yore marbles. Aintcha got no spirit of the chase in yuh?"

"Speakin' personal, right now I ain't," growls Puggy. "An' I ain't a mite interested in makin' history in Cactus County, either. Likewise an' besides, I ain't lost no bears. I ain't lost one hair outa the hide of a lil' weeny bear or a great big bear. Finally an' complete, I can be a thousand miles away from any an' all bears an' never miss 'em a-tall. Now yuh know."

"Everythin' Puggy says goes for me," I states. "It goes double in clubs."

Shoo-fly looks us up an' down, kinda scornful. "Shame on yuh! Yuh wouldn't be tellin' me yuh're scared?"

"Not scared," I snaps. "Jest—well—cautious. A cautious man lives long an enjoys good health, so the poet feller says."

Shoo-fly shakes his head, lookin' sad. "Who'd ever have thunk it? Who'd ever have thunk that my two ol' pardners in triumph an' deesaster would git to showin' the white feather jest on the account of a little bitty ol' bear!"

"What?" squawls Puggy. "Did you say a lil' bitty ol' bear? Are you blind? Take another look at that there bear track. It's

as big as a satchel. Ol' bear that made that track will weigh three or four thousand pounds—easy!"

Shoo-fly looks at Puggy, kinda startled. "I knew that mountain mule which Honeybee's pappy trotted out was smooth an' potent, but I never figgered it to be that full of authority," sez Shoo-fly. "Ain't no bear ever walked that weighed three—four thousand pounds. How about it, Ike?"

I had to admit that Puggy's estimate of the bear's weight was a trifle on the high side. "Jest the same," I adds, "this'n ain't no ordinary bear. This'n is a regular ol' lallapalooser of a bear an' I'm statin' frank an complete that I ain't yearnin' to git in no wrastlin match with it."

"Lookit Johnny Longo an' Cat-face Collins," jibes Shoo-fly. "They ain't hangin' back. They is runnin' down the trail of this ol' bear plumb eager an enthusiastic."

"Yeah," I raps back. "They is. But Johnny's got hisself a .45-90 shootin' rifle slung to his saddle whilst Cat-face has got a pair of .45 Colt guns hung to his belt. What's I an' Puggy got? Nothin' but our bare hands!"

"That's all I got, sez Shoo-fly. " 'Ceptin' my rope. Me, I aims to dab me a loop on that bear if'n I gits the chance. Allus did want to dab a loop on a bear an' see could I hog tie it. Now I asks yuh—wouldn't that be somethin' was ol' Shoo-fly to rope and hog tie a bear big as this'n?"

"Wouldnt it!" sniffs Puggy. "You kin afford to play peek-a-boo with a bear, Shoo-fly, where I an' Ike can't. You is so danged shriveled an' dried up no bear'd be interested in takin' a bite outa you. Be worse'n chawin' on a ol' boot. But I an' Ike, we got a lil' sustenance on our bones that'd prove plumb attractive to a bear, which is what we're rememberin'."

SHOO-FLY gathers up his reins an' makes ready to ride on up ahead where Johnny and Cat-face is. He gives us another scornful look. "Ain't nothin' on yore bones but some hide that's yaller as saffron," he snorts. Then he gigs his bronc an' digs out.

Puggy glares after him. "Don't know when I was ever so much outa patience with that sassy lil' bee-head. Hope he does git a rope on this bear. Hope he gits drug forty miles on his belly through wild blackberry vines. Teach him somethin'."

Well gents, yuh heard me say yuh can never tell about a bear. Not les'n fifteen minutes after I and Puggy has our jawin' match with Shoo-fly, things happen to prove I'm right. The trail has led over another of them gloomy timber ridges and drops down into a narrow gulch on the far side, a gulch that's crooked and narrow and full of boulders and rock ledges on either side.

Instead of crossin' this gulch the trail turns an' leads up it an' Puggy, liftin' high an' anxious in his stirrups, sniffs.

"Ike, I kin smell bear," he sez. "I kin smell plenty of bear!"

Now me, Ike Ferris, I ain't the best smeller in the world, but I'm willin' to take Puggy's word that he kin smell bear. Because the broncs is smellin' bear, too. They is beginnin' to skitter and snort and dance and show signs of wantin' to turn around and light a shuck outa there, pronto! Which goes to prove somethin' I allus claimed. Which is that most generally a hoss has got more common sense than most humans.

Now get the picture, gents. There we is in that narrow, rocky gulch that's plumb full of bear smell. Likewise and besides, the afternoon is runnin' out and the timber ridges has shut off the last of the sun. Things is gloomin' up and me, Ike Ferris, I'm thinkin' to myself that this'd shore be one awful unpleasant place to die, all chawed to slithereens by a irritated bear.

Up ahead, ridin' together, is Johnny Longo an' Cat-face Collins. About fifty feet behind them rides Shoo-fly Davis, and durned if the locoed lil' hooty-corn ain't got his rope out and a loop all spread and ready to toss, should that bear pop up sudden-like outa the rocks. Mebbe a hundred feet back of Shoo-fly rides I and Puggy, both wishin' we was back in Cactus City, starvin' to death. Remember what I said about not bein' able to tell about a bear? Well, this'n shore lived up to that uncertainty. Mebbe this ol' bear was so full of Johnny Longo's veal meat it was sleepin' too sound to hear Johnny and Cat-face ride by. But it shore hears Shoo-fly and so help me, up outa the rocks it rears, not more'n fifteen feet from Shoo-fly.

Big? Holy cow! That ol' bear looked like a box car liftin' out them rocks. It had a head like a beer keg an' eyes that was red and wicked as sin. It lays back its ears an' opens its mouth and I see tusks gleam white and savage and long as a skinnin' knife. Gentlemen, I was lookin' at the granddaddy of all bears!

Now it musta been that Shoo-fly's bronc was momentary plumb paralyzed with fright, for it stopped right in its tracks and stood there, froze stiff. I and Puggy didn't blame it none. We was froze stiff, too.

But not Shoo-fly. No, sir! That ornery lil' scratch cat reaches out, quick as scat, and tosses his loop around that bear's neck and twitches it snug. Then he lets out a war whoop.

"I got him!" screeches Shoo-fly. "I got a rope on ol bear. Gimme room! I got him!"

Now it coulda been possible that up to there ol' bear was only half irritated. But the insult of havin' a lil' squirt like Shoo-fly dab a loop around its neck madded up that bear—and fast!

IT R'ARS up a lil' higher and lets out a growlin' roar that was worse'n thunder in the hight hills. That roar has fire and brimstone and sudden death in it and it gives I and Puggy a case of the twitches and shakes that like to jiggled us apart, right then and there. It does something else. It shore unparalyzes Shoo-fly's bronc.

I swear that bronc goes six feet in the air, straight up, switches ends and comes down runnin', straight at I and Puggy. Now if Shoo-fly had even the sense of a half witted angle worm, he'd let go of that rope. But not Shoo-fly. He throws a dally around his saddle horn and gets set for things to hit the stretchin' point. Shoo-fly has hisself a bear on the rope and he aims to stay with it.

Shoo-fly's bronc is runnin' like a shot at coyote so it don't take long to reach the end of that rope. I dunno yet how it is that Shoo-fly's cinch held up under that sudden and terrific yank. By all the laws of plus an' minus that bronc of Shoo-fly's shoulda run right outa that cinch and from under the saddle and so left Shoo-fly and all his gear right slap dab in the bottom of the gulch plumb at the mercy of the bear.

But as I say, the cinch on Shoo-fly's saddle held and the rope didn't break either. So under them conditions, somethin' has to give. This time its the bear. Big as that bear was, yuh gotta remember this. That bronc of Shoo-flys wasn't no runt of a hoss.

It'd weigh bettern'n nine hundred pounds and it was really ramblin' when that rope snatches taut. Even a plenty big bear couldn't stand up agin that without blinkin' a coupla times. Anyhow, this bear is snatched right outa its bed of rocks, turned over about six times in the air an' lands all spraggled out. And mad!

The first roar it had let out wasn't nothin' to the bawl it lets go with this time. I swear my hair stood straight up an' stiff as a porkypine's quills and Puggy is just as bad off. Our broncs don't need a mite of urgin' to git ramblin' and down that gulch we flies.

First there is I and Puggy, laid out along our broncs an' screamin' for more speed. Right at our heels come Shoo-fly.

"I got him—I got him!" he's whoopin'. "I got a rope on ol' bear. Gimme room—gimme room!"

The bear is in this peerade, of course, bawlin' along about a jump and a half behind Shoo-fly's bronc. Talk about the charge of the Light Brigade! There wa'nt ever no charge in all history to equal the one flittin' down that cussed gulch.

Clear back of everythin' comes Johnny Longo an' Cat-face Collins, with Cat-face bellerin', "Git clear—git clear—so I an' Johnny can do some shootin'!"

As if I an' Puggy wasn't doin' our level darndest to git clear! Could we have sprouted wings we'd shore flew, high an' far. But we ain't angels, yet, though there's the awful possibility of that change bein' made pronto and any second, what with ol' bear shaggin' and frothin' after us like a runaway tornado. Anyway, Cat-face and Johnny don't dare try a shot for fear they'd miss ol' bear and scrag either I or Puggy or Shoo-fly.

Puggy manages to git hisself a lung full of air an' he howls back at Shoo-fly. "Let him go—let him go!" he yells, "Yuh consarned lil' idjit, let go that bear!"

"Let him go—nothin'!" screeches back Shoo-fly. "I got him an' I'm stayin' with him. Gimme room an' I'll throw him down an' hog tie him. Gimme room!"

Room—space—there ain't nothin' which I and Puggy craves more. But how yuh

gonna find room and space in a dad burned narrow gulch like that 'un? All we can do is ride for our lives, which we does.

There's gotta be an end to everything, accordin' to the wise men. There was an end to that gulch. All of a sudden it opens up into a lil' timber flat. I'm jest beginnin' to think that there's a chance for Ike Ferris' comin' off with a whole skin when a lot of things happen, plumb simultaneous.

NOW I'd figgered I was up on a purty fast bronc, but I'd forgot how close that bear was to Shoo-fly's hoss and that up to now Shoo-fly's hoss had been kinda blocked off from really runnin' by Puggy and I out in front. Anyhow, now that things had opened up in this flat, that bronc of Shoo-fly's comes sailin past me like my bronc was tied to the ground. Whilst for reasons only a mad bear would understand, ol' bear shoots off at a tangent. Now there's a six strand hard braided rawhide riata rope connectin' the bear with Shoo-fly's bronc an' that rope cuts my bronc's feet from under it like a sharp ax cuttin' down a saplin'.

One jump my bronc is doin' a fair job of runnin'. The next it's turnin' a backwards summer-salt and I, Ike Ferris, is landin' on the back of my neck on the ground, fair prey for the maddest, meanest bear in forty states.

"Goodbye, Ike Ferris," to myself I sez. "Goodbye, ol' Socks! You never was what the world would call a great man, but among ordinary folks you rated fair to middlin'. But mebbe yuh ain't done for yet, not if yuh get up real pronto an' get up runnin'!"

Which I does. I can feel the heat comin' right up through the soles of my boots, what with the friction that's set up while I'm tryin' to get traction. I ain't seein' too well about then, but what I does see is a wild mixture of hosses goin' round and around and what I hear is a bear bawlin' mad and savage.

Gents, you got no idee how hearty and enthusiastic I sets out to put on the fanciest spell of runnin' any mortal human bein' ever showed. But there is somethin' comin' up behind me an' I know without lookin' that it's a bear!

Faint an' far away I hears ol' Puggy yell, "Jump, Ike—jump!"

Puggy shoulda told me which way to jump, but long as he didn't I jumps straight up. An' when I come down, what do I land on? Gentlemen, you may call me a liar, but I swear that what I lands on is—bear!

Yessir, I lands plumb straddle of that cussed bear. Plumb instinctive I clamps tight, diggin' in my spurs, grabbin' me a double handful of bear wool to hang on to. An' then things do happen! Everything that had took place up to then was puny and meek and mild compared to the thunder and lightenin' I was now mixed up in.

In my time I've straddled some purty kinky broncs, but the worst of them was a rockin' chair along side of that bear. I dunno what the bear thinks, havin' a peaceful cowpoke named Ike Ferris clamped sudden to its back, pullin' wool with both hands and settin' spurs as deep as possible, but I know what Ike Ferris is thinkin'. Which was to stick close and hang on.

Ol' bear rears straight up, bawlin like a banshee. It makes three-four backhanded swipes with them big razor clawed paws, tryin' to scrape me off'n its back, but it jest can't quite reach me. An' all the time that derned lil' fool of a Shoo-fly who's more'n half responsible for my plumb precarious position, keeps yellin'—"Leggo my bear—leggo!" he shouts. "He's my bear. I put a rope on him an' he's mine! I'm the guy what's gonna hog tie him. Leggo my bear, Ike!"

The consarn lil' idjit. He'd oughter knowed I didn't want his cussed bear. What I wanted was to be a wide thousand miles from that ol' bear. Question is—how'm I gonna do it? If'n I let go, ol bear is plumb shore to unshuck me complete with one swipe with its paw. Only place I'm safe is right where I is, so there I sticks, tighter'n a cockle-burr to a shaggy dawg.

Ol' bear gits tired tryin' to paw me off so it puts on a session of buck jumpin' that'd made the toughest outlaw bronc that ever breathed plumb green with envy. Talk about a chore of ridin'! I jest ain't completely shore whether I'm comin' or goin'.

Then ol' bear really gits rough. It starts rollin over and over and you kin guess what happens every time it rolls over. Me,

Ike Ferris is underneath and the sensation ain't much worse'n bein' run over by a steam enjine. And all the time ol' bear is bawlin' an' coughin' and snarlin' somethin' turrible.

WELL, sirs, as the poet feller says, there comes a time in every man's life when he realizes he's a plumb busted flush. That's me. I've done hung on all I can hang. Come sudden death or what has you I realizes I'm due to come unstuck an' I figgers this is the finish of Ike Ferris —sure.

Right about then here comes Shoo-fly bustin' by, still yappin' for me to leggo his bear. Ol' bear he riz right up an' took a swipe at Shoo-fly and while that reachin' paw don't quite git holt of Shoo-fly proper it does hook onto his clothes an' what I mean Shoo-fly gits hisself undressed complete, then an' there.

That's when I leggo all holts. I figger in the next second or so that I'm due to be a dead Injun, but ol' bear don't pay no attention to me atall. It's got holt of Shoo-fly's shirt and britches and for a lil' bit of while is plumb occupied with rippin' and tearin' them things to pieces.

I'll tell a man I don't need no more chance than this. I hits my feet and whizzes plumb outa there and I reckon I'd have gone on whizzin' for miles and miles if'n ol' Puggy hadn't headed me off.

"Hold up, Ike—hold up!" yelps Puggy, gallopin' up along side me. "Yuh can snaffle down now. Ol' bear, he's gone—done lit a shuck. Yeah, pull up, Ike, 'fore yuh run yoreself into a spell of heaves."

I skids to a stop an' hangs on to Puggy's stirrup. "Wh—wh—where ol' bear?" I gulps. "Where'd he go?"

"Couldn't exactly tell," sez Puggy. "He left so fast an' sudden he plumb evaporated before m'eyes. I'd call that feller the runnin'est bear—ever. Now let's go round up yore bronc an' line out for Cactus City, where we can starve to death in peace. Me, I've had enough bear to last me for the rest of my born days."

"If'n yuh've had enough," I pants, "Me —I've had twice more'n plenty. Gosh-amighty! What a ride that was—what a ride!"

So we ambles back to round up my bronc. An' what do we see? Well, for one thing we sees Johnny Longo and Cat-face Collins, who by rights oughter shot that ol' bear—we see 'em rollin' on the ground huggin' theirselves, kickin' their feet in the air an' laughin' like they was fit to bust.

I stands over 'em, hurt an' stern-like. Sez I— "An' I thought you were friends of mine! Here I stand, jest late emerged from the jaws of turrible an' sudden death, an' all you jiggers can do is laugh at me."

Cat-face, he rears up on one elbow an' whoops, "We ain't laughin' at you, Ike. We is laughin' at—well, looky yonder. Looky yonder at the gent who was gonna rope an' hawg-tie hisself a bear. Yeah—looky yonder—" An' ol' Cat-face he goes into another fit of whoopin' an chokin'.

I an Puggy, we looks. An' what do we see? Gents, I blush to tell yuh what we see. Yonder stands Shoo-fly Davis, lookin' plumb bewildered an' pop-eyed an' flabber-gasted. Did I say that ol' bear, in that one swipe he took at Shoo-fly, plumb undressed the lil' feller? Well, such is the truth. Shoo-fly is nekid as a jaybird.

Me, I dunno what to say. Then I hears Puggy begin to sort of snort like he was gettin' ready to strangle. An' fust thing you know Puggy is down on the ground with Johhny an' Cat-face, howlin' louder than both of them. Mebbe it was the reaction from all the turrible strain I'd been through. Because the fust thing I knows, I'm down on the ground with the rest, laughin' my fool head off. Durned if Shoo-fly don't look powerful comical, at that.

When we is plumb laughed out an' so weak we can hardly squeak, Johnny Longo sobs, "We'll have to take him home in a saddle blanket. We'll wrap him all up like a Injun papoose."

"How about ol' bear?" I asks. "I'm shore hopin yuh ain't aimin' to trail down no more bear, Johnny."

Johnny manages to sit up. "A fast flyin' eagle couldn't trail that bear. I'm sayin' that bear is at least a good hundred miles from here, right now. Come full dark ol' bear'll be plumb five states away, easy. I'm bettin' that bear never does feed on any more of my veal calves."

And gents—as far as I know, it never did.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 10)

was an excellent spring of pure cold water that gushed out like a fountain from a hollow in the prairie. It was called Diamond Springs, but it once came near being turned into a field of horrible death for a whole troop of cavalry which had camped there late in the autumn, when Kaw Indians set fire to the prairie grass all around the camp.

It was only by heroic work in fighting the fire, backfiring the grass against the oncoming fire, that the cavalry were able to save themselves and nearly all of them were more or less painfully burned in the battle with the prairie fire.

Near Diamond Springs in a draw were the bones or skeletons of a great number of oxen which were supposed to have perished in a blizzard, while not far from the remains of the oxen were the iron parts of a number of wagons that had been burned, the silent remains of a good-sized wagon train, but no one seemed to know how it came about, whether the wagon train was attacked by Indians and all the wagons burned or just what had happened. Travelers in need of a bolt or some iron part of a wagon usually could pick up what they wanted from this burned string of wagons.

Bent's Fort

Bent's Fort was on the northern branch of the trail after it forked at Fort Dodge. For many years it was the only building of any size between Westport, Missouri, and New Mexico. It was built by William Bent for the firm of Bent & St. Vrain, the biggest traders of the entire country.

The fort was a great massive walled building or series of buildings, with numerous loopholes and portholes for cannon. The wall was some thirty feet high, and at one end the building was two stories high. There were iron bound gates, massive and strong, and above these gates a square blockhouse with windows from which a long brass telescope might be seen.

The fort was right in the middle of a large prairie and there was no chance for any man or body of men to approach it without being seen. The main building contained some thirty bedrooms. It was practically a town or city within itself, as all kinds of goods,

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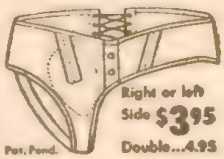

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cooking utensils, hardware, and groceries were carried in stock, together with guns and ammunition, everything down to rings and trinkets for trade with the Indians.

Great stacks of buffalo robes were pressed and tied in bundles to be taken east to be sold on the eastern markets. The establishment often employed as many as a hundred people —traders, clerks, packers, teamsters, hunters, servants and the families. There were Americans, Indians, Mexicans, Frenchmen, and Germans in the establishment. Many of the men traveled eastward in summer with Brent's caravans, loaded with goods for the eastern trade.

An Outrage on the Trail

In that section, where the little village of Wagon Mound now stands was one of the tough parts of the trail. Here the Indians often raided or attacked overland traffic. It was here that Dr. H. White, a popular resident of Santa Fe, returning with his wife, child and a nurse from a visit to the east, was attacked by the Indians. White and eleven of the party were murdered and scalped, and his wife, child and the nurse were kidnapped.

When the news of the outrage reached Santa Fe, a large body of men started in pursuit of the marauders. After several days they came upon the Indians and a battle ensued, the Indians seemingly fighting to stall off the attackers to give their women and children a chance to get away. After a time, the Indians took flight, but left at the scene of the battle the body of Mrs. White, pierced with several arrows. The body was hardly cold, showing that the Indians had killed her as their last act before taking flight. The child and the nurse were never seen or accounted for.

There was at first no settlement where the town of Las Vegas now stands, but about twenty years after the trail had been established a settlement or village sprang up on the west side of the Gallinas River, which now divides the present city, the original village being now called Old Las Vegas and the town on the east side of the river being called East Las Vegas.

Infested by Outlaws

Old Las Vegas became a stopover on the Santa Fe Trail, and a trading center. It was

a typical adobe town, and after the establishment of the new town, the old town grew very little while the new town grew and prospered, notwithstanding the fact that it was the home or hangout of one of the worst gangs of criminals that ever infested the west.

Depredations became so numerous that the respectable citizens were so aroused that they began dealing with the outlaws in no gentle terms. A windmill in the center of the plaza became the favorite gibbet used by the Vigilantes to end the careers of outlaws.

A placard was painted and displayed upon the windmill announcing "Notice to Thieves, thugs, fakers and bunko-steerers among whom are" (it then went on to name a dozen or more or their aliases) "if found within the limits of this city after 10:00 P.M. this night, you will be invited to attend a grand necktie party, the expense of which will be borne by 100 substantial citizens." Hangings became so numerous that the owner of the windmill had it dismantled.

Some two hundred miles east of the west end of the Trail at Santa Fe there was a

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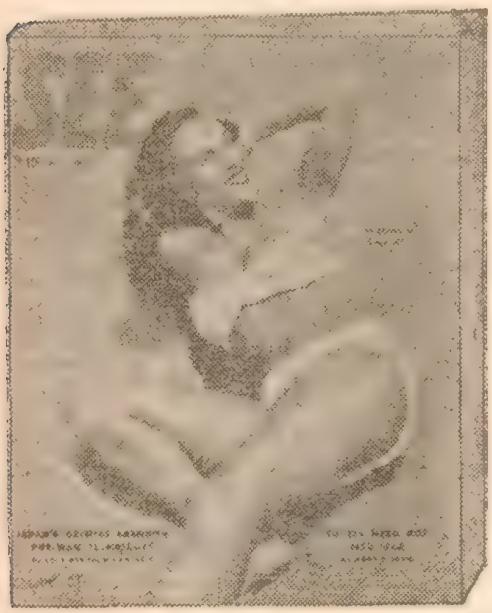

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camp stop called McNees Creek. The creek received its name from a tragedy. In the Autumn of 1828 a returning caravan had reached this point on its long way to Missouri. Two young men, McNees and Monroe, riding along ahead, had become tired, and carelessly lay down to rest on the bank of this stream. They went to sleep, and the Indians found them. Within sight of the caravan they were killed, shot by their own guns.

When the slow-paced caravan came up to them, their comrades found McNees dead, and Monroe dying. McNees was wrapped in his blanket and buried in a shallow hole, afterward filled with poles and rocks, to keep the wolves from digging him up. Monroe was put into one of the wagons and carried on to Cimarron, where he died and was buried in his turn.

Just as the burial was completed, half a dozen Indians appeared across the river. Probably these Indians had nothing to do with the killings, but the traders did not wait to find out. They started after the Indians and the redskins, seeing the guns of the traders, turned to escape. But the first shot brought down one pony, and the following volley riddled all but one of the Indians. That one, of course, lived to carry the news to his tribesmen.

A few days later these had their revenge, and swept away nearly a thousand horses and mules belonging to that caravan. Not satisfied with that, the redskins lay in wait for the others. They pounced upon a party of twenty men, a pack train with a cargo of Mexican silver. They attacked, killed one man, and stampeded all the animals. When they had gone the survivors divided their treasure, and plodded on foot, each man lugging nearly a thousand dollars in silver. On the Arkansas they cached the silver until they could return and get it.

Builders of the Future

Those early-day trails have left with us, or handed down to us, from one generation to another, many thrilling yarns as we are told of the many hardships and dangers met by those pioneers, met with unflinching courage and with a determination that will not be denied.

Perhaps they did not know that they were starting the building of a great and prosperous empire for later generations to enjoy.

Perhaps they had no thought of the future only as concerned themselves, their homes, their wealth and happiness, but there are recorded acts of many of them that showed that they did visualize a civilized west where at that time there was but a wilderness.

For what they did, and what they left for us to enjoy, we should always respect the memory of those brave old pioneers who traversed the Santa Fe, the Oregon, the Chisholm and the other early-day trails, for they were the men who helped to make America. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

HOW many of us ever stood in the winey crisp depth of some western forest on a deep October morning, inhaling the deliciously pungent smell of earth and trees, and listening to the staccato splat of a lumberman's axe as it slashes its inevitable path through the base of a green-clad forest giant? How many of us have heard some modern-day Paul Bunyan shout his fabulous warning, *Timb-e-r-r-r-r,* and then seen a mighty Douglas Fir come crashing to the

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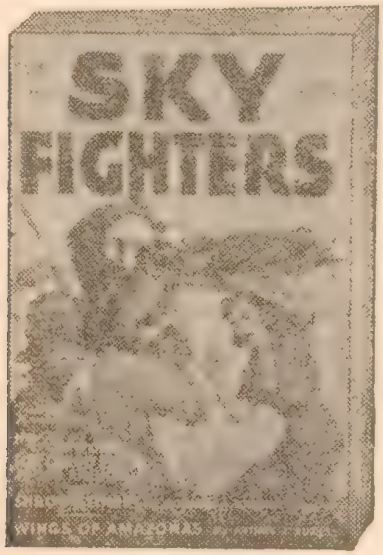

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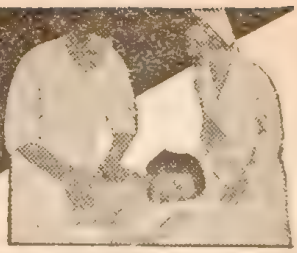

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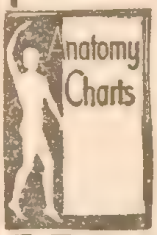

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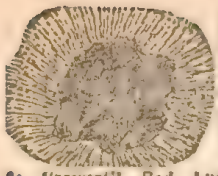

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ground in an atomic cloud of hailing branches and dismembered needles?

Well, we suppose it's an experience that all too few of us have had. Perhaps that is the reason we are happy and proud to bring you in the next fascinating issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN a thrilling novel of the western timberlands featuring your old friends Wayne Morgan, the famous Masked Rider, and his Yaqui saddle pard, Blue Hawk. You'll want to trail along with them as they ride out on their most exciting adventure which author Walker A. Tompkins has entitled, *War in Gunsmoke Gap.*

Fast moving from acorn to oak, *War In Gunsmoke Gap* will give you a dramatically vivid picture of America's oldest and most hazardous industry, the lumber business.

War In Gunsmoke Gap kicks up its heels in the High Sierra region of California and as the story opens we find Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk riding through the heavily timbered plateau country, about to enter Gunsmoke Gap. Rounding a bend in the ancient military wagon road on which they have been traveling, the two riders find their path blocked by an enormous tree. Nailed prominently to the center of the trunk is an ominous notice that reads:

LAST WARNING!

Gunsmoke Gap is closed to cattle and cowboys as of now. This ridge is the deadline. Patroled night & day by armed guards. Wagonwheel Ranch keep your distance—also Grover Lotfalk. We Mean Business.—*REESER TIMBER COMPANY.*

It was Blue Hawk who remarked to Wayne Morgan, "Senor, this means danger. We must detour around Gunsmoke Gap. These guards, they might not take me for a cowboy, but you—" Blue Hawk left the sentence dangling.

But they could not turn back to the north for in Oregon many sheriffs would have given their eye-teeth to put a bullet into the notorious Masked Rider to whose name many crimes were falsely attributed. Wayne Morgan realized that it would be far wiser to move on to new places where they were unknown. In author Tompkins' own words, here is what happened.

"Remember those Wagonwheel-branded timber cattle we saw grazing on the bench flats this mornin', Hawk?" Morgan said finally. "I got a hunch a lumberin' outfit has laid claim to the timber in Gunsmoke Gap and that Wagonwheel is the cow outfit that's tryin' to buck 'em. From the look of things our getaway route is a-straddle

a cattle-timber feud. Which makes it bad for any hombres with law posses breathin' down their necks."

Blue Hawk waited in silence, his craggy mahogany-colored face impassive. The decision to cross this timber company's deadline rested with Wayne Morgan; as an obvious cowboy he would be the first target of a lumberjack's rifle if they attempted to run the gauntlet of Gunsmoke Gap.

"To turn back would be suicide," Morgan said, making up his mind as to their next move. "If you're game, Hawk, we'll risk crossing Reeser's deadline and trust to bein' able to convince any gunman we meet that we're strangers passing through the Gap. Their bullet wouldn't be any worse that the ones that Oregon sheriff could send our way."

"Si, Senor," Blue Hawk said. "To go ahead is the only way." Mentally bracing themselves for the crash of gunshots and the impact of ambush lead drilling their bodies, Morgan and Hawk touched their ponies' flanks with steel and put their animals over the fallen tree with all the skill of steeplechase riders.

The pair rode through the forest for some distance, keeping off the trail and cutting through the trees near its border where they grew with less profusion than deeper in the forest. The sounds their horses made were muffled by the thick green carpet of pine needles which covered the ground.

They were riding like this when they reached a logged-off clearing several acres in extent and caught sight of an empty-saddled horse grazing at the foot of a tall pine. Of one accord Morgan and the Yaqui reined up in the dense fernbrake at the edge of the clearing, their eyes shifting at once to the top of the straight, flagstaff-like tree. At its very crown, dwarfed to antlike proportions by the great height, a rigger was hanging from his lifebelt and spurs, busy installing a steel collar to the crown of the tree. It was this rigger, no doubt, who owned the saddlehorse.

"This is a spar tree," Morgan explained in a low voice to his partner, knowing that Blue Hawk's life in the Mexican Border wastelands had not schooled him in the ways of the tall timber country. "The rigger will attach a steel cable—a high line—to that metal collar. I imagine the Reeser Timber Company will use that heavy cable to transport logs to their holding pond or sawmill."

A warning grunt from Blue Hawk caused Wayne Morgan to shift his gaze back to the ground. He was in time to see a skulking figure

[*Turn page*]

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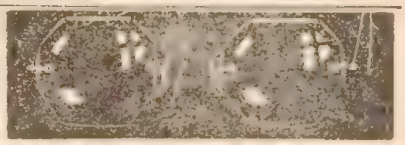

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emerge from a bosque of wild elderberry brush near the foot of the spar tree and kneel at its base, placing an object he was carrying in a cavity between two roots of the tree. The man wore the garb of a cowboy rather than a lumberjack. Completing his mysterious business the man returned to his concealment in the berry bushes.

For several minutes the Masked Rider and his Indian pard continued to watch the rigger, thinking no longer of the curious parcel the cowboy had secreted in the tree roots. They were about ready to mount and ride on when a terrible noise shattered the stillness of the clearing. As author Tompkins tells it:

A violent explosion sent shock-waves across the clearing to smite their eardrums like nails being hammered through their temples. Before their horrified eyes, Morgan and Hawk saw a tall-timber tragedy in the making. The blast had come from the very foot of the spar tree, a blinding flash followed by mushrooming clouds of dynamite smoke, dust and splintered wood.

The rigger's high-pitched scream of terror sounded above the organ-tone which the falling tree emitted as it whistled through space. The great pine hurtled to earth with a shock that made the ground shudder beneath them.

"Cover me, Hawk!" Wayne Morgan exclaimed. "We've seen murder done here. There's not a chance I'll find that rigger alive but I've got to get to him in case a miracle happened—"

But when Morgan had fought his way through the tangled undergrowth, he found the rigger crushed but still breathing. Morgan bent low over the mortally wounded man's mouth and listened as hoarse words gargled through the blood in his windpipe:

"You'll have to kill . . . every jack in Reeser's camp . . . to settle this . . . feud in the Gap . . . cowboy . . . Wagonwheel . . . pay for this . . ." Before Morgan could cry out in protest, to deny his authorship of this fiendish murder, he saw death relax the mangled rigger's body.

Remembering the nameless killer in the berry clump, Morgan leaped to his feet and whirled about, hands plummeting to gunbutts. Then he froze as he saw he was surrounded by eight towering lumberjacks armed with felling axes and peaveys.

One of them, a towering young giant whose cinnamon-colored beard matched the shade of the dead rigger's bloody hair, screamed like a berserk maniac:

"This cowhand killed my brother! We caught him in the act of finishin' him off—" Before Morgan could raise his arms in surrender he saw the red-whiskered giant draw back his great

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right arm and hurl his double bitted axe straight at Morgan's body.

Morgan attempted to throw himself to the ground, but at such short range there was no missing the hurtling axe. Its steel blade's flat surface smashed a glancing blow against his skull in passing, lifting the cowboy into a whirling black void where pain and fear and all other sensation had no meaning. . . .

And that, folks, is only a small sip of the heady brew you'll taste when you read *War In Gunsmoke Gap.* Truly one of Walker A. Tompkins' finest novels!

Of course, to go along with the feature novel, we've gathered a swell bunch of other yarns, articles and departments for your reading pleasure. The next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN will be a humdinger! Look forward to it.

MAIL CALL

WE'VE got a complaint this time out of the chute, or maybe it's just a puzzle that we can't quite figure out! In any case this is the story. We've been noticing lately that most of our letters come from the Western and Southern portions of this fair land. We rarely get any mail from you midwesterners and it's practically a snowy day in July when a letter rolls in from down-east. Just why that is we couldn't say. Our guess is that there's a shortage of ink and writing paper here and there around the country. Of course, we could be wrong. How about it?

Anyway, our first note this time is a bouquet all the way from Paris:

I certainly look forward to receiving my bimonthly subscription to MASKED RIDER over here because it's a tangible link with the States. The covers, all featuring the fabulous Wayne Morgan, adorn the walls of my room in this lonely and drab old pension. They add an exciting bit of color to the room and my life. Thank you so much for such a fine magazine.—*Constance Heilbrunn, Paris, France.*

Why now, Connie, that's right neighborly of you taking time out to write us. We know you must be mighty busy, studying art over

[*Turn page*]

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there. Write us again some time. And now an unkind letter from a citadel of gracious Southern tradition:

Johnny, Get Your Guns by Oscar J. Friend, in the December number of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, was a first rate novel loaded with some darn real people. I thought it was great stuff. Only one story marred an otherwise perfect issue and that was *Santa In The Saddle* by Johnston McCulley. A few of my friends also read it and they, like me, thought it was positively silly.—*Stuart Pines, Charleston, South Carolina.*

Funny thing, Stuart, but we liked that story ourselves and so did a number of other readers who wrote us. But that's okay, pal—we're glad you told us what you thought. That's what we like—a frank, full opinion, without any punches pulled. And now for a note from a gentleman in Georgia:

Your magazine is tops with me. The Masked Rider is my idea of a great character.—*William Newlent, Atlanta, Ga.*

Short and to the point! Another recent postcard:

Others may rave about the Masked Rider, but as for me, I like Blue Hawk best. I like the Rider allright, but his Yaqui pard really takes first place with me. Do any other readers feel the same way?—*E. N. Bartron, Roswel, N. M.*

Well, do they?

I wish to commend you on the excellent covers on your recent issues. They are fine paintings. I know, being as artist myself.—*"Dauber," Jackson, Miss.*

Thank you, "Dauber." And that's it, friends. We'll wind up, though we would love to quote from countless more letters. But rest assured that whether your note is printed or not it has been carefully read and studied. Send your gripes, grapes and persimmons to the Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. We'll be waiting to hear from you.

Before signing off, folks, let me give you a grand entertainment hint. If you like hearing about the old railroading days, and the wild West of the 90s, you can't do better than see WHISPERING SMITH, the new Paramount Pictures Technicolor hit starring Alan Ladd and featuring Robert Preston, Donald Crisp, Brenda Marshall, William Demarest, Fay Holden and others. It's an unforgettable and thrilling picture for all Western fans.

Thanks to all. See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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